

## Identifying the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Syrian and Congolese Refugees' Health and Economic Access in Central Pennsylvania

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**Abstract :** Introduction: The Pennsylvania State College of Medicine Refugee Initiative is a student-run organization that works with eleven Syrian and Congolese refugee families. Since 2016, it has used grant funding to make weekly produce purchases at a local market, provide tutoring services, and develop trusting relationships. This case study explains how the Refugee Initiative shifted focus to face new challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Methodology: When refugees who had previously attained stability found themselves unable to pay the bills, the organization shifted focus from food security to direct assistance such as applying for unemployment compensation since many had recently lost jobs. When refugee families additionally struggled to access hygiene supplies, funding was redirected to purchase them. Funds were also raised from the community to provide financial relief from unpaid rent and bills. Findings: Systemic challenges were encountered in navigating federal/state unemployment and social welfare systems, and there was a conspicuous absence of affordable, language-accessible assistance that could help refugees. Finally, as struggling public schools failed to maintain adequate English as a Second Language (ESL) education, the group's tutoring services were hindered by social distancing and inconsistent access to distance-learning platforms. Conclusion: Ultimately, the pandemic highlighted that a charity-based arrangement is helpful but not sustainable, and challenges persist for refugee families. Based on the Refugee Initiative's experiences over the past year of the COVID-19 pandemic, several needs must be addressed to aid refugee families at this time, including: increased access to affordable and language-accessible social services, educational resources, and simpler options for grant-based financial assistance. Interventions to increase these resources will aid refugee families in need in Central Pennsylvania and internationally

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