

The City of Philadelphia Partners with United Language Group to Provide Health Screenings to Afghan Refugees

How United Language Group helped the Philadelphia Department of Public Health provide vital COVID-19 screenings and medical evaluations to 25,000 refugees with 48 hours notice.

"It is my absolute pleasure to recommend [ULG] as a language solutions partner. They have shown excellent quality work managing the City of Philadelphia's account as a unit, understanding the various needs of different City agencies, and offering flexibility at the time of submitting projects. This collaborative approach not only is cost-efficient, but it allows teams to take the lead and make decisions when submitting projects."

- Maria Giraldo Gallo, Language Access Program Manager, City of Philadelphia Office of Immigrant Affairs



The Challenge

In August 2021, the US Armed Forces began a planned withdrawal from Afghanistan after 20 years of war. The Taliban quickly toppled the existing Afghan government, and hundreds of thousands of refugees fled the country. Tens of thousands of these refugees were evacuated to the US.

During August and September 2021, "The City of Brotherly Love," welcomed 25,000 evacuees from Afghanistan through the Philadelphia International Airport. Upon arrival, each refugee required COVID health screenings and medical evaluations.

Safely accepting large numbers of refugees is logistically complicated in general. Add in an ongoing global pandemic, and the situation becomes even more complex. City public health officials knew they needed Dari and Pashto interpreters to welcome the evacuees and conduct screenings in their own languages. Additionally, turnaround time was a challenge: the city had only 48 hours' notice before the first wave of evacuees arrived at the airport.

The Solution

Working closely with the Office of Immigrant Affairs, the ULG team sprang into action, tapping into its network of skilled interpreters to quickly assemble the right team for the job. A special situation like this requires more than just language skills. The refugees coming in were especially vulnerable. They were flying in directly from a war zone, and had been through an intensely traumatic experience. The ideal interpreters would need soft skills and emotional intelligence to put the newcomers at ease.

To ensure the medical evaluations were conducted correctly and the right terminology was used, interpreters needed medical interpreting experience, as well. ULG has 35 years of experience providing language services for the medical sector and working with public health departments.

Drawing on that expertise, ULG was able to streamline the process of finding and deploying medical interpreters in this unique situation. A rigorous testing process was used to ensure the interpreters were a good fit for the job, bringing in specialists from as far away as Virginia. For 3 weeks, ULG provided interpreting services on demand, at all hours of the day and night.

As a result, the barriers to care were removed and refugees received skilled, compassionate screening and evaluation in their own languages upon arrival at the airport.

At a Glance

ULG Deliverables

- Work with the Office of Immigrant Affairs to find and deploy interpreters with 48 hours' notice.
- Screen potential interpreters to find candidates with the right mix of language expertise and soft skills to support this vulnerable population.
- Offer interpreting coverage for COVID screenings and medical evaluations as planes of refugees came in, at all hours of the day and night.

Proven Results

- Approximately 25,000 refugees went through screening at the Philadelphia airport.
- Interpreting services were provided for 3 weeks with 24-hour coverage.
- The City of Philadelphia was able to implement safe quarantine protocols to mitigate the spread of COVID.
- Refugees received necessary medical care immediately upon arrival.
- The evaluation process reduced barriers to care and prevented later emergency room visits.