IMAA WFS: Digital Equity Project

Prepared by Rawhi Said, MBA

1. What is your organization's greatest success story in 2020? Feel free to note additional success stories, and please explain why you see these stories as successful.
   a. IMAA historically has been an agency that has always prided itself on building bridges in the community. We are no stranger to adversity, being that IMAA has been around since the 80's it has seen many successes and in the beginning of 2020 it felt like it was going to be more of the same. As we are all aware, 2020 has been unlike any other year, little did we know that the successes were not going to come as easy as perhaps anticipated. We were tested by a pandemic nobody saw coming very early on, but so was everyone else in our community. The pandemic pushed us to see just how strong the foundation of our work is, and the resilience of our staff would be. While there are many success stories that can come out of this, I have chosen for the sake of time to focus on one specific victory from this year. IMAA started the year anticipating events, and gatherings with its families and clients to hear firsthand what issues and problems refugee and immigrant families face when it comes to system changes. Our goal was to not assume that we knew what immigrant and refugee families with children under five needed, but rather to hear it from them first hand. We wanted to build an equitable way to account for all the stories that the families would share with us. This idea was set to be executed amongst a diverse group of families, from Africa, Southeast Asia, and even from Central, and South America. The hope was to highlight the common system barriers that families encounter while celebrating the cultural differences that can play a huge role in the dynamics of how families ask for assistance. With all this in place, and literally two weeks before the face-to-face interviews were set to begin, COVID shut down the nation. We were quickly thrown into a problem that was unlike any other we have encountered before. How does an agency connect with its families and clients if not face-to-face? We quickly saw a hidden problem be magnified many times over, that being digital divide. Sure some families could connect telephonically or maybe virtually in a few cases but what about the others? Simply said, we found people of all background experiencing the digital divide, be it their child's school moving online, or working remotely and not having hardware, or reliable broadband. The issues were so blatantly clear and inequitable that we knew that our focuses must shift to digital equity. It should be also noted that it was not the only priority focus for us but it did take up the most time and resource in 2020. With the support of the State DHS office, local non profit partners, and IMAA leadership we were able to secure over 200 new laptops to hand out to families with children ages 5 and under. It wasn't enough to stop at just handing out laptops, we quickly understood that for some of these families this was their first piece of technology meaning that understanding and simple functions on a laptop that others truly take for granted in today's day in age were completely foreign to them. With that issue presented to us, we worked extremely hard and were able to collaborate with our local universities and local community members to provide what we coined "Cultural Tech Support". The Cultural Consultants were individuals, students, and folks from the community that reflected the population we were serving. It was the first attempt to my knowledge to create a tech support for people whose first language wasn't English. While this was great news, it wasn't enough so our third and final win

was when a local credit union decided to bring private dollars into a sustainable and reliable internet fund. The credit union created a seed fund account and donated 10,000 dollars to kick off the broadband fund. This fund is open to all businesses and individuals who wish to assist families in obtaining internet and or paying a portion of their internet. This approach is a huge success, since many families have to choose between broadband internet, rent, groceries, utilities, medication and other choices. Our efforts, along with the partnership with the Credit Union is getting traction to a point that this seed fund account will be used to help sustainably cover internet costs for families that are truly in need. Ultimately, a drop in the bucket, but in a year of digital divide this has been our closest attempt to solving an age old issue that seems to have only gotten worse with the pandemic.

2. If you partnered with other organizations in your community, how did the partnership or network come together? How do you continue to collaborate with other organizations?
   a. We are fortunate that IMAA has so many partners both nonprofit and for profit partners. They all understand the impacts that our families are facing and having them at the table was a very easy achievement for us. Once we explained our goals, and how we want to tackle system's change it was easy to partner with organizations. We were strategic in partners we choose. We wanted partners who had experience with early childhood education and we wanted partners that had experience with diverse demographics, along with regional partners who serve other cities and counties in Southeast Minnesota.

3. How does your organization address issues of equity in your community? For example, implementing culturally competent programming, language services, and/or outreach.
   a. IMAA is an agency that was founded for refugees, and by refugees. Equity is one of the many virtues we incorporate when doing our work. In fact, culturally competent programming is incorporated in every service we have be it Employment Services, Victim Services, Community Health Services, or even our Interpreting and Translating services (I&T). We also have a diversity, equity, and inclusion department that I lead; its core objective is to help culturally consult businesses in the community to address the very issue of equity in the community we all share. There is not an industry we haven't worked with to address these issues, from manufacturing, healthcare, education, to even banking we have worked tirelessly addressing DEI in the community.

4. How has your organization reached clients/participants since March? Do you have recommendations for adoption of services or community outreach strategies?
   a. This is a great question, and the super-secret answer I'm afraid isn't as sensational as people think it might be. The answer is simply relationship building. We make sure that every client or participant truly gets to know us, and that we do the same to get to know him or her. Another way to say that is we don't believe in numbers, but rather a face, name, and story. Learning about them and their families, while in same breath having them get to know us. When the relationship is in place families create trust with us, and since March, we have been able to connect with them and assist them as if we were assisting a friend or family member. Not all refugees and newcomers need us, but I would bet all of them know and trust us. Relationships are important to IMAA. We value this because we know how useful it can be for our work, but also know how easy it can be to lose if we break that trust. By committing ourselves to building a

tangible relationship with our families, we know that they will reach out to us when something is needed, and that is the secret to our outreach strategy. Of course we do connect with them occasionally when other resources are made available and we do that with outreach workers from different communities such as Spanish speaking and Somali communities.

5. What strategies has your organization employed to address digital inclusion? What has worked or has not worked well? And why do you believe that it has or has not worked?
    a. Please refer to question one on strategies for digital inclusion.
    b. What has worked for us is the large commitment by private and non profit businesses in recognizing the shift and importance of a virtual world. Many of our families not only are getting laptops for the first time but they are getting tech support in their primary language, and also qualifying for internet assistance. These are huge when talking about inclusion of refugee and immigrants with respect to digital inclusion.
    c. Since the COVID crises has exacerbated digital inequities to a proportion unlike any seen before, the community has truly rallied to make sure that the less fortunate are able to participate. That in my opinion is the silver lining from this pandemic. It clearly shows the magnanimous generosity of this community to help with an issue such as digital divide. Of course, more work is going to be needed to reach a point where this is no longer an issue in this city, state, and country. My mantra is moving forward on a problem slowly, is still moving forward.

6. What recommendations do you have for organizations to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic and/or expand digital access? Or what would you recommend to *your organization* if you could return to March and coordinate a response?
    a. My biggest recommendation would be to focus in on small tangible quick wins. Meaning what can be implemented right away, regardless if we believe it is just a "band aid" approach. This is important because a lot of time and resources went into discussing while families went a few months without any help. Remember many small wins will ultimately add up to one overall large win. This is often forgotten about, or perhaps not thought of, when looking at the big picture. That's why I recommend truly staying grounded and introducing small, quick wins. Things like rolling out laptops to families even before tech support is ironed out, or rolling out tech support before internet broadband is even understood. Things that allow us to constantly be moving while actively collecting information and adapting as we move and learn from the families.

7. What is the greatest barrier to digital access in your community? What are other barriers? How do resources in your community ameliorate barriers to digital access? And what further support is needed to achieve digital equity?
    a. The biggest barrier will be sustainability. How do you continue to secure laptops, scale cultural tech support, and provide internet without passing the costs off somewhere? If this can be answered than I believe all other barriers to digital access can be tackled.

8. What adaptations that your organization has made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic do you believe will remain after the public health environment improves? Why do you believe that adaptations will prove permanent?

a. As an organization, we have invested greatly into technology ourselves. This was even before the pandemic hit us. This was because we knew that our organization outgrew our current space and we were forced to adapt. When the pandemic came it tested our ability to adapt and work remotely. Once all goes back to normal we will still have some staff work remotely as this adaption was on the walls for us for a long time, but the COVID crisis accelerated it to a point that now we are capable of implementing this change permanently.