



Thought Leadership Corner

By: Minji Kim

[About the Author](#)

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Why I Serve with Refugees

“Sharing is caring!” This simple yet powerful phrase has been my inspiration for serving others. Growing up as a member of an immigrant family, I overcame many difficulties stemming from financial, language and cultural barriers. These life experiences instilled a strong desire to positively impact the lives of underserved communities in America by sharing my knowledge and time.

Since freshman year, my personal interest, background of cultural diversity and passion for empowering vulnerable communities motivated me to serve refugee communities. I volunteered as an afterschool and English at Home tutor through New American Pathways. My experiences in serving families illuminated the critical role of education in empowering marginalized communities and encouraged me to join New AP’s AmeriCorps Project RISE after I graduated from college.

As an afterschool Curriculum Development AmeriCorps member last year, I taught various afterschool curricula ranging from literacy and character development to health lessons, fulfilling academic, social and emotional needs for students. Over time, I truly marveled at the interpersonal relationships I built with students from various cultures and enjoyed learning about in my students’ academic and social progress.

I also had an opportunity to share with my students’ families my personal experiences of difficulty navigating the U.S. medical system. My mother, for instance, still does not speak nor understand English well. Having escorted her to many doctor’s appointments to interpret, I came to understand how daunting the U.S. medical system can be for people from different cultures, backgrounds and languages. My personal and AmeriCorps experiences in serving communities motivated me to commit to another AmeriCorps service year as New AP’s Health Services member to explore and support the entire journey of refugee families in obtaining quality health care. A couple of stories stand out for me:

An Afghani family of nine arrived early this year. One of the children is disabled and needs much medical attention. The responsibilities of taking care of the entire family along with his sick brother were on the oldest son of the family. At first he was very confused about the medical system in America and lacked the confidence to learn how to support his disabled brother. As New AP educated him about accessing the health care system – guiding the process of setting up specialist appointments, taking MARTA to go see a doctor, requesting the Language Line – he acquired the necessary skills that he needs to overcome multiples barriers in medical care.

One of our Syrian refugee families arriving from Turkey had children with rare kidney disorders. Due to lack of information about the disorder, the parents, and even our case managers, did not know how to properly manage the children’s medical condition. With tremendous effort we linked the family to one of the clinical research programs. The facility provided several educational materials about the medical condition, and we helped the family to adjust their

lifestyle based on the guidelines that the facility and health provider suggested. Now all the boys are doing well and the parents are able to manage proper home care on their own.

Serving both refugee youth and adult members, I witnessed the two core components that are pivotal for paving refugee families' pathway to success: self-sufficiency and intercultural relationships. All New AP staff and AmeriCorps members strive to tailor their services to the cultural needs of refugee families. It helps to build trust with our clients as we find culturally and linguistically appropriate health care providers, or when we seek female medical personnel for our female clients when preferred due to religion.

Building interpersonal relationships by serving refugee families widened my worldview and my confidence to engage in meaningful, multi-cultural interactions. Most importantly, reflecting on the lessons and skills I acquired through serving others, friendships I built with my refugee families, and delicious foods and tea from the families, reinforced my belief that serving is not just about caring through sharing, but also about being cared for by those whom I serve.

Minji Kim currently serves as New AP's Health Services AmeriCorps member through Project RISE (Refugee and Immigrant Success through Education). She assists new Americans in navigating the U.S. healthcare system and in finding doctors who are culturally and linguistically appropriate.

In her free time, Minji loves to draw, and she volunteers at the Clarkston Community Health Center to help uninsured and underinsured patients access medical services. She says that the best part of serving at New American Pathways is learning about the different cultures, foods, traditions and cultural norms of the new Americans we serve – and also learning how to say short phrases in the many different languages that they speak.