



MEMORANDUM

TO: Trustees & Interested Persons

FROM: Cassandra Kaufman, Executive Director **BOARD ACTION REQUIRED**

DATE: September 11, 2026

SUBJECT: Approve Funding from the Community Mental Health Emerging Needs Fund

BACKGROUND

In 2012, the St. Louis Mosaic Project was launched after St. Louis economic leaders hosted Tamar Jacobi to present a study she authored which demonstrated the benefits of welcoming the foreign born to urban centers. This organization continues to be focused on workforce development and the economic contributions of the immigrant and refugee communities but has also helped to influence policy and local government. Most recently in 2023, the Office of New Americans was created by Mayor Tishaura Jones within St. Louis City government.

In 2013, the MHB, Lutheran Foundation, and the Marillac Mission Fund partnered to convene a series of focus groups to better understand the behavioral health sector and address the unmet needs of the immigrant and refugee communities, as well as their service providers. From those initial focus groups, the Immigrant Services Provider Network (ISPN) was created. Today, ISPN continues to meet monthly with at least 30 different organizations represented. In addition, ISPN committees, while focused differently than in 2013, continue to actively address the unmet needs within the immigrant refugee community.

The landscape of St. Louis regarding immigrants and refugees has shifted, although there continue to be multiple efforts to be more welcoming and supportive, and as of 2022, St. Louis experienced the highest growth for immigrant and refugee populations within the 30 urban hubs in the U.S. Over the last 11 years, the ISPN has continued to convene community providers, coordinate, educate, and advocate for the service providers themselves, in addition to the communities they serve.

NEED STATEMENT

Current federal and state climates are considered hostile and unwelcoming to immigrant and refugee communities. Local service providers are doing their best to absorb the trauma, provide education and advocacy, support the individuals, families and businesses that are adversely impacted, while experiencing their own fatigue, despair, danger, and secondary trauma.

Staff serving immigrant refugee communities constitute a specialized workforce, often with knowledge of multiple languages, a background of living abroad, having lived experience as a

marginalized population, and skill sets that the general social service provider typically lacks. It is because of this that intervention is needed to ensure stability and minimize losses for those on the front lines, but the support does not stop there. Supervisors and administrators are similarly stretched and must participate to understand the impact on themselves and feel empowered to create a supportive workplace culture.

PROGRAM MODEL

For over 30 years, the World Café methodology has utilized structured conversations with a "harvest" of participant learning, to spark deep introspection and community change. Café conversations have been adapted around the world, including by the Chicago-based organization *Be Strong Families* which developed a specific model called Vitality Café. Therapists and facilitators Nancy Spargo, LCSW, and Katrina Orlet, LCSW, propose tailoring the Vitality Café Model to address the support needs of immigrant and refugee community providers and pilot it with MHB Funded Partners serving adults. A similar proposal has been approved by the St. Louis County Children's Service Fund to offer Vitality Cafés to the same immigrant refugee service provider organizations whose staff focus on serving children.

The tailored Vitality Café Model includes:

- A structured, peer-to-peer conversational model that uses appreciative inquiry with principles of adult learning to provide a safe, structured space for participants to gather, share stories, and build resilience. The format leans heavily on community wisdom rather than lectures.
- Opportunities to discuss specific "domains" of well-being—Environmental, Financial, Mental, Physical, Social, and Spiritual. These domains strongly correlate with the six principles of SAMHSA's model of trauma-informed care.
- A parallel process to ensure that all participants, including executives, middle managers, and front line service providers benefit both individually and organizationally while rediscovering their zeal for this important work.
- A series of dyad, small group, and large group conversations will be conducted, as well as having participants create a Commitment Card to themselves, which they will receive between sessions.
- Concurrent cafés for direct service providers, supervisors / middle management, and administrators / executives would be offered on the same day, with the three sessions being provided at two-week intervals.

This program is being developed as a pilot, in order to determine the effectiveness of offering this intervention to three different tiers of staff concurrently with the goals of bolstering staff well-being and retention, improving service delivery, and increasing organizational health. Participant feedback will inform future offerings, including invitees and the structure of the intervention.

Cohorts

The first of two cohorts would consist of three tiers of staff at agencies currently or previously funded by the MHB or the St. Louis County Children's Service Fund (CSF). These organizations would include two types: those that serve primarily immigrants, and those that have dedicated teams that serve immigrants. Including these two types of organizations will allow for a large enough pool of participants in the event that some organizations could not commit to Cohort 1, they could be invited

to Cohort 2. It would facilitate networking beyond referral calls, which is especially important in relationship development with newer professionals in a post-COVID environment.

- Tier 1 of the cohort would include executive leaders. They would participate in the initial session and receive a summary of the intervention after all three sessions. Recognizing the limits of their availability, the goal of this single session would be to offer them a rejuvenation experience, as well as to ensure their buy-in for their staff's participation in all three sessions. Leaders often forgo self-care practices and experience compassion fatigue in isolation. We do not expect them to be able to attend all three sessions, but if that should arise from the initial meeting, the facilitators would be prepared to offer that opportunity.
- Tier 2 of the cohort would include supervisors and middle managers. These participants are critical to the project given their unique demands that include administrative tasks and staff supervision while still providing direct services.
- Tier 3 would be front line staff who have the most exposure to secondary trauma, inadequate resources for those they serve (a source of burnout), and frequently have the least autonomy.

The second cohort would be developed based on learnings and feedback from the first cohort. Participants could include organizations that were not able to participate in the first cohort, as well as organizations that serve immigrants but do not have dedicated staff teams. Additional invitees could include social service professionals who work in immigrant serving organizations that are not funded by the MHB or CSF, and mental health providers not experienced in working with immigrants. This cohort could be larger and include multidisciplinary organizations that offer services beyond traditional mental healthcare.

Incentives

Each tier would have a distinct incentive structure to reflect the personal demands and needs of the participants' respective roles within the organization.

- Tier 3, front line staff, would receive lunch and an incentive for each participant for each session. Incentive distribution plans include drawing via a wheel or similar approach for varied gift cards; Visa gift cards with amounts based on years of service; or a gift card/item distributed with a shout out that is unique to the participant.
- Tier 2, supervisors/middle managers, would receive breakfast and an incentive for each participant for each session. Incentive distribution plans include drawing via a wheel or similar approach for varied gift cards; gift card/item distributed with a shout out that is unique to the participant; or gift card/item distributed that is based on their role as a leader (staff participation, etc.).
- Tier 1, leaders, would have refreshments and the opportunity to win a meal for a set number of staff, catered by an immigrant chef.

Facilitation

Katrina Orlet, LCSW and Nancy Spargo, LCSW, both seasoned clinical social workers, long time providers of mental health services to the immigrant and refugee communities, speak Spanish fluently, and have also provided licensure supervision, clinical supervision, field instruction, and program support within nonprofit organizations. Passionate about high quality services for vulnerable populations and concerned about the current state of the behavioral health workforce, they have

proposed the use of Vitality Cafés based upon the World Cafe methodology to support staff of organizations serving the immigrant and refugee communities.

Katrina Orlet is trained in Parent Cafés through *Be Strong Families*, and has hosted café conversations for Monarch Immigrant Services, Ritenour School District, Casa de Salud, ISPN Annual Conference, Immigrant and Refugee Ministry, South City Girl Scout Summer Day Camp, and Square GPS. She has facilitated a Community Café as a board member of the St. Louis Child Abuse and Neglect Network.

Budget and Fiscal Sponsor

The Network for Strong Communities has agreed to serve as fiscal sponsor in the event the project receives funding.

Budget Line Item	MHB Request	Budget Justification
Consultant Compensation	\$ 8,500	34 hours x 2 people x \$125/hour = \$8,500 includes preparation, conducting the intervention and follow-up time
Supplies	\$ 100	Session supplies
Incentives		8 organizations, 8 executives, 10 middle managers, 20 front line staff
Executives	\$ 2,000	5 lunches x 20 people x \$20/person = \$2,000
Front Line Staff	\$ 1,200	3 lunches x 20 people x \$20/each = \$1,200
Middle Managers	\$ 450	3 breakfasts x 10 people x \$15/each = \$450
Refreshments	\$ 80	For executives 8 people x \$10/each = \$80
Gift Cards	\$ 2,700	3 gift cards x 30 people x \$30/each = \$2,700
Commitment Cards	\$ 49	98 cards x \$0.50/card = \$49
Postage	\$ 78	98 cards x \$0.80/card = \$78
Total Projected Cost for 1 Cohort	\$ 15,157	

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Clinical Partnership Director Poli Rijos, LCSW, a native Spanish speaker from Puerto Rico and Lead Staff for MHB's portfolio of programs serving the immigrant and refugee communities, became aware of the support needed by service provider staff this past spring while conducting site visits with funded partners and as an active member of ISPN. Deputy Director Serena Muhammad and Poli Rijos met with Katrina Orlet and Nancy Spargo, active ISPN members, to confirm what they were learning regarding the support needs of immigrant and refugee service provider staff. Poli also met with Jessica Streit-Hrevus, Program Officer, St. Louis County Children's Service Fund (CSF) to compare what she was learning from funded partners with what CSF was learning from their funded partners.

Executive Director Cassandra Kaufman and Deputy Director Serena Muhammad met with CSF leadership and determined that if approved by MHB's board, MHB would focus on supporting service provider staff that served adult immigrants and refugees and CSF would support one cohort of service provider staff that served children and youth. Staff are recommending an award not to exceed \$16,000.00 from the Community Mental Health – Emerging Needs Fund to pilot one Vitality Café cohort focused on service provider staff that serve adult immigrants and refugees.

CITY OF ST. LOUIS MENTAL HEALTH BOARD OF TRUSTEES (MHB)

APPROVE FUNDING FROM THE COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH EMERGING NEEDS FUND

RESOLUTION

WHEREAS, the City of St. Louis, Missouri has levied taxes pursuant to the laws of the State of Missouri Sections 205.975 – 205.990 RSMo. to fund the Community Mental Health Fund (CMHF) and the Board is entrusted with administering this fund; and

WHEREAS, for more than 20 years MHB has funded programs and services specifically designed to meet the unique and varied behavioral health needs of immigrants and refugee residing in St. Louis City; and

WHEREAS, current federal and state climates are considered hostile and unwelcoming to the immigrant and refugee communities. Local service providers are working to absorb the trauma, provide education and advocacy, support the individuals, families and businesses that are adversely impacted, while they themselves experience fatigue, despair, danger, and secondary trauma; and

WHEREAS, staff that deliver behavioral health services to immigrants and refugees constitute a specialized workforce, often with knowledge of multiple languages, a background of living abroad, having lived experience as a marginalized population, and skill sets that the general social service provider typically lacks; and

WHEREAS, MHB staff learned directly from funded partners that serve the immigrant and refugee communities, the Immigrant Service Provider Network, and peer funders about the challenges, concerns, and support needs of these specialized behavioral health staff; and

WHEREAS, therapists Nancy Spargo, LCSW, and Katrina Orlet, LCSW, propose tailoring the Vitality Cafe Model to address the support needs of immigrant and refugee community service provider staff and to pilot the intervention with MHB Funded Partners serving adults; and

WHEREAS, a similar proposal has been approved by the St. Louis County Children's Service Fund to offer Vitality Cafés to many of the same immigrant refugee service provider organizations whose staff focus on serving children.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:

The Board of Trustees authorizes the Board Chair and Executive Director to execute a contract with Network for Strong Communities, a nonprofit organization that has agreed to serve as fiscal sponsor for the Vitality Café pilot cohort, not to exceed \$16,000.00 from the Community Mental Health – Emerging Needs Fund.

APPROVED THIS 17th DAY OF SEPTEMBER 2026:

Board Chair/Officer Name (printed):	Signature:
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ATTEST:

Board Officer Name (printed):	Signature:
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