



Women's Resilience Center International Rescue Committee in San Diego

The Women's Resilience Center is a safe, collaborative space where the diverse needs of all women and girls are respected and where women and girls can seek, share, and obtain information about their rights and their inherent potential for safety, health, education, economic wellbeing, and power. It is a responsive, creative space that engages women and girls as co-creators and encourages expression, enhanced wellbeing, and community connectedness.

BACKGROUND

Starting a new life in the U.S. as a refugee comes with many challenges from learning English and securing employment to adapting to a new environment and cultural norms. For those who identify as women and girls in particular, the challenge can be even greater as they face additional barriers to adjusting to life in America. Refugee women are less likely than men to work outside the home, limiting their opportunities to build social networks and learn English. Internal research across IRC programs has indicated that there continues to be a discrepancy in outcomes between men and women, and girls and boys, and client feedback surveys have shown that many of IRC's female clients report facing social isolation upon moving to San Diego.



The IRC has been working toward narrowing the gender gap across all programs and becoming a more gender equitable organization for many years. This has included conducting internal research to assess gender inequities in client outcomes across services, as well as identifying adjustments to program models and supportive services to remediate the inequities. This led to the development of the Safety and Wellness Unit which has prioritized staff awareness around gender-based violence and trauma informed practices, creating an environment that is safer for survivors to access services. In addition, the IRC in San Diego has created targeted programming such as Women in Action, Business Women in Action, and Girls Academy which more holistically and responsively address the needs of female identifying clients.

Historically these efforts took place in 10-week cohorts as staffing and funding allowed. Past participants have requested time and again the desire to stay connected when cohorts end, and for a safe space in their community to gather with other women and continue to engage in learning opportunities. To create a permanent space and continue to improve the efficacy of interventions aimed at supporting women and girls, the IRC set a goal to open a full-time Women's Resilience Center (WRC) in our El Cajon office.

WOMEN'S RESILIENCE CENTER LAUNCH

In late 2019 that vision was realized via a challenge grant from The San Diego Foundation which, matched by contributions from the community, provided the seed funding needed to launch the Women's Resilience Center. A full-time coordinator was hired and a soft opening with client participants took place in early 2020. While the in-person grand opening scheduled for March was canceled due to the outbreak of the COVID19 pandemic, the WRC continued to grow at a time when community and connection proved to be needed most. Staff used phone calls, WhatsApp chats, and ZOOM video calls to continue to connect with clients and develop programming virtually.

In its first year, the Women's Resilience Center successfully engaged the community in the planning and design of the space and its offerings, including 21 participants who took part in focus group discussions and key informant interviews. In addition, 41 women participated in a variety of services and activities virtually and, when possible, in person including:

- Workshops on topics such as self-care, coping with stress and financial wellness
- Support groups for caregivers
- Weekly yoga and movement sessions
- The design, build, planting, and maintenance of a vegetable garden at the New Roots Fresh Farm Community Garden in El Cajon.

Through these initial conversations and activities the needs and interests of participants as well as the barriers they may face in accessing the WRC were identified. IRC staff are now working with community members to create a strategic planning group, made up of women who would like to meet regularly about the development of the WRC. Through these ongoing meetings, we hope to ensure those who access the WRC will continue to be involved as co-creators of the space.

We look forward to the year ahead when the WRC can safely return to its dedicated location in the IRC's El Cajon office, and be fully realized as a physical space for refugee women to both make friendships day-to-day, as well as engage in emotional support groups and learning opportunities.

CURRENT NEED

With the launch and continued growth of the Women's Resilience Center we have an exciting opportunity directly engage clients who identify as women and girls as co-creators of a space dedicated to gender transformative programming, enabling us to better understand and address gender inequities experienced by refugee women.

The San Diego Foundation's challenge grant provides \$60,000 per year for two year and is contingent upon the IRC raising an additional \$60,000 in matching funds each year to make the Center's annual \$120,000 budget. The first year match was raised through a generous gift from San Diego Gas & Electric as well as contributions from the community, and we are currently working to raise the year two (2021) \$60,000 match.