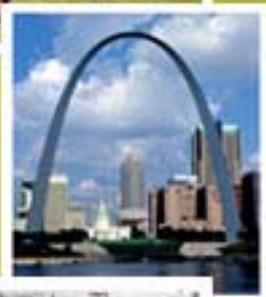




INTERNATIONAL
INSTITUTE
SAINT LOUIS

Our Story





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(To conduct in-depth research about the International Institute of Metropolitan St. Louis and its services to the community, check the archives at the University of Missouri-St. Louis Library.)

WELCOME

With America's population now drawn from virtually every corner of the world, our nation must grapple with both the promise and risk of being a global society. The International Institutes and other members of the USCRI network are frequently called on to serve as valuable resources to national policy makers, local communities, governmental bodies, and human service agencies.

The USCRI network spans 20 states. It includes more than 30 member agencies and field offices with the USCRI headquarters located in Washington D.C. Each year, through members and field offices, more than 1 million immigrants are provided with vital adjustment services. Services include refugee resettlement, job placement, English classes, citizenship, immigration counseling, small business development, housing, health, youth and elderly support, and cultural activities. Positive community impact from these services is high.

As pioneers in the field of diversity, these agencies are also an important link in local partnerships. Many of the partner agencies are key consultants on a broad range of issues affecting communities across the United States. Today the USCRI network continues to promote Our nation's core belief of "Out of Many, One."



Today's programs at the International Institute of St. Louis have their roots in the Institute's very beginnings. Its founders and those who followed them have always been deeply concerned with helping newcomers adjust to life in America while retaining their diverse cultural traditions.



Ruth Holliday Watkins, first Board Chair, photographed in 1990

In 1919, Ruth Holliday Watkins and a group of caring St. Louisans founded the International Institute to help large numbers of refugee and displaced women coming here from the war-torn countries of Europe. Working through the local chapter of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), volunteers established a variety of adjustment services. These services mirrored those being set up in almost 60 other cities nationwide.

Excerpts from the Institute's first annual report give a sense of life in those days. They also highlight resemblances between the Institute in 1919 and today. The report was written by the Institute's first executive director, Letitia Fyffe, in May 1920.

The early International Institute joined with the Red Cross to rent a three-story building at 2338 S. Broadway, in one of the two main "foreign" areas in the city. The building had already had a lively history, having housed a saloon and lodging house with a dance hall on the third floor.

In September 1919, the Institute opened for services. Its formal dedication was held in November with Jane Addams of Chicago's Hull House giving the keynote speech.

By the end of the first year, the Institute's staff consisted of eight people. The executive director and two other Americans worked with five "nationality" (ethnic) workers. Between them, they spoke 15 languages: Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Croatian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Armenian, Turkish, Italian, Spanish, Romanian, French and German.

Many of the early Institute's resources were dedicated to casework, and "the protecting of foreign women and girls from exploitation." Clearly, Institute staff and volunteers were helping an underserved population. Of the first year's cases, 61% had never been reached by any other agency.

About half the first year services were medical. "The other [half]," Miss Fyffe notes, "were general welfare cases, which included the placing of children in homes, finding of employment, bringing in touch with schools and classes, legal advice, and most important of all the general friendly counsel so essential in helping solve the unaccustomed problems found in America."

In immigrant neighborhoods, the Institute's efforts were unexpected and much appreciated: "In the clinic where our Polish interpreter first began her work," says Miss Fyffe, "a little Polish woman, who came with a small boy to translate for her, on hearing her own tongue spoken, looked up and said with surprise, 'Has God sent someone to work among the Polish women?'"

There were special problems in working with the Mexicans, the newest of the local immigrant groups. The men worked on the railroads. Their families were housed in boxcars, which frequently changed location. A box car/home where an English class was held one week might be switched somewhere else the next. "They are literally a floating population!" Miss Fyffe exclaims.

In the first year, the Institute organized 24 English classes. They reached Armenian, Serbian, Polish, Mexican, Italian, Bohemian, Romanian and French women.

Clubs for women and girls were an important activity. By the end of the first year, six had been formed – three for women and three for girls. "A





club of little girls, calling themselves the Sunshine Club was formed at the request of its two original members, who came to the Institute one afternoon asking, 'If this was the place where you learn something.'"

Today's Festival of Nations has its origins in the International May Festival, first held in 1920. Organized by the International Institute, the May Festival was one of the earliest multicultural

celebrations in the nation. It took place eight years before the National Folk Festival, which was also held in St. Louis.

Miss Fyffe proudly describes the crafts and performances featured in the 1920 international festival. "The exhibit of foreign handicraft was collected from among our own women. All were intensely interested in contributing their share, delighted at our appreciation of their cherished belongings."

By that evening, "[there was] a foreign atmosphere to the scene," she writes. An estimated 2,000 people attended. "Pennants representing most of the Nationalities in St. Louis were stretched across the street with an American flag in the center."

After a program of music and dance, the ceremony concluded with "a tableau representing the Institute welcoming foreign-born women at the hands of Uncle Sam."

"The future of the International Institute is limitless," concludes the first annual report. And, so it has proven to be.

In 1923, the Institute became a member of the United Way's predecessor, the Community Chest. The next year, its services expanded to include men as well as women.





In 1934, the Institute organized our first “Festival of Nations” for the formal dedication of the Municipal Auditorium (Kiel).

During World War II, agency staff and volunteers helped relocate Japanese Americans from internment camps on the West Coast.

After 1945, the Institute developed programs for war brides. In the beginning most were European. Later, services were expanded to Japanese war brides.

Since 1980, the Institute has become nationally known for its innovative programs for refugees. Today, the tides of refugees seen at the Institute are continually shifting, from Southeast Asia, to Eastern

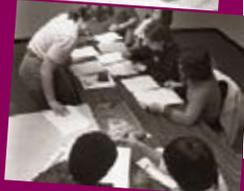
Europe, to Africa and the Caribbean. It is also playing an increasingly important role in revitalizing the St. Louis community by helping immigrant entrepreneurs start and expand businesses, which provide jobs and grow our tax base. And the Festival of Nations, which draws 125,000 annually, has become one of the most popular multicultural events of the region.



Institute staff and volunteers have responded creatively to each group of newcomers and their special needs. They encourage refugees to become self-sufficient members of the community while preserving cultural traditions. Thus, the wheel has turned full circle, from the earliest programs developed by Ruth Holliday Watkins and Letitia Fyffe to the Board, staff and volunteers of the Institute today.

TIMELINE

- 1916 Beginning of the National International Institute movement. Over the next decade, nearly 50 Institutes are established in major metropolitan areas in the East and Midwest.
- 1919 In November, formal dedication of the St. Louis International Institute, which was organized as a committee of the YWCA. Jane Addams of Chicago's Hull House gives the dedication keynote speech.
- 1920 In May, the St. Louis International Institute sponsors its first International Folkfest.
- 1923 The Institute separates from the St. Louis YWCA and joins the Community Chest Council of St. Louis (United Way's predecessor).
- 1934 International Institute sponsors Festival of Nations at Municipal Auditorium (Kiel) as part of its dedication activities.
- 1942 Institute staff organizes a Women's Defense Group of foreign-born women to assist in the war effort. They also assist in the relocation of 30 Japanese American internees from relocation camps.
- 1945 A Young Women's Group is organized for foreign-born wives of American servicemen.
- 1950 The only Citizenship classes in St. Louis begin at the Institute.
- 1953 English classes for Japanese wives of American servicemen start. The Institute staff organizes foreign students at all area colleges and universities for social events.
- 1956-58 A Hungarian refugee program is conducted at the agency. The Institute conducts a capital campaign and purchases its first facility at 4484 West Pine.
- 1960/75 Emphasis is placed in English classes and socialization activities. The Share Plan For Intercultural Education is launched in 1969.



- 1975 As the war in Indochina ends, the Institute sponsors 20 single Vietnamese men and assists hundreds more with English training and job search. Its first federal refugee services contract is received.
- 1978 Anna Peterson Crosslin is hired as the agency's Executive Director. Its full and part-time staff includes 9, and the annual budget is \$175,000.
- 1982 The Institute relocates to 3800 Park Avenue. The larger facility allows agency programs to expand to meet the needs of a growing clientele.
- 1992 International Folkfest re-introduced, being held at STLCC-Forest Park, and at Webster University before moving to Queeny Park in 1994.
- 1993 Institute begins resettling what will become the largest Bosnian community in America.
- 1999 Institute successfully completes a \$2.5 million capital campaign and relocates to newly renovated facility at 3654 S. Grand in the heart of St. Louis' growing new American community.
- 2001 Festival of Nations is re-introduced in Tower Grove Park near the City's thriving International District.
- 2003 Anna Crosslin celebrates 25 years at the helm of the agency.
- 2007 The International Institute Community Development Corporation is launched to help immigrant entrepreneurs get loans and start more small businesses.
- 2008 Attendance surpasses 100,000 at the Institute's annual Festival of Nations. The Institute receives a Neighborhood Excellence Award from Bank of America, including a \$200,000 capacity-building donation.
- 2009 The Institute's 90th Anniversary is celebrated with the dedication of the William K. Y. Tao Refugee Resettlement Fund.

