2020 Annual Report

2020 was a year like no other as a result of the COVID pandemic and subsequent region-wide shutdown which started in March through year-end.

In addition to the wide scale economic shutdown, officials effectively cancelled refugee arrivals. As a result, only seven cases (32 refugees) arrived in St. Louis between April and September 2020. In all 133 refugees were resettled by IISTL in the calendar year, a drop from 232 arrivals in 2019 and an 88% decrease from 2016.

In spite of low arrivals, the work of the Institute continued at a fast pace. Many refugees and immigrants already in St. Louis still required essential language communication. This annual report offers details about how we kept our refugee communities connected with vital information about city services, protection techniques, school operations, COVID testing and more.

During these months, we also stood publically in support of racial justice as the deaths of George Floyd, Manuel Ellis, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and others served as harsh reminders of racial and societal inequities in our region and around the nation.

Internally, we focused even more intensively on our multi-year Diversity Equity & Inclusion initiatives to further expand multiracial and multicultural representation among our staff, Board, and leadership. We revamped our job categories and minimum job qualifications, application submissions, recruitment pipeline, and professional development processes with an eye toward equity and inclusion.

In spite of a challenging pandemic year, careful budget management resulted in roughly breakeven unaudited year-end financial results, when grant revenue received and recorded in previous years was taken into account. Kudos to our Board and staff who met IISTL’s 2020 fundraising goal, securing more than $661,000 in contributions from individuals and companies.

In the spring, the Board created a search committee in light of Anna Crosslin’s impending retirement in early 2021 and retained an executive search firm. By year’s end, an offer had been extended and I joined the Institute as its new President & CEO in February 2021.

Arrey Obenson
President & CEO
May 2021

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Chair: Arindam Kar
Vice Chair: Alice Tharenos
Secretary: Cullen Andrews
Treasurer: Eric Hansen
Immediate Past Chair: Anh Pham-Nguyen
President & CEO: Anna E. Crosslin (ending Jan. 2021)
Arrey Obenson (beginning Feb. 2021)

2020 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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COVID-19 Response

Beginning in March 2020, IISTL enacted a number of changes to ensure continuity of services for our clients in the face of a rapidly growing COVID pandemic.

From the get-go, a COVID-19 Response Committee was created at the Institute to address the safety needs of staff and clients. The team hastily reorganized service provision to ensure that clients would have access to essential services in the face of the mid-March shutdown declaration by Mayor Krewson.

Since our clients heavily rely on information and services from IISTL due to language and cultural barriers, the committee rapidly shifted communications and services online. Clients were notified of local regulations as well as revised processes on how to access services at IISTL, which in a few cases also included socially-distanced meetings arranged outdoors at client residences.

From the outset of the pandemic, information on regional responses and initiatives was not available in multiple languages. Ensuring refugees and immigrants had access to accurate, up-to-date information regarding local orders as well as health and safety recommendations was therefore a priority.

The agency converted its internal telephone notification system to an external messaging system and began delivering key messages related to the pandemic in eight languages. Using our client list, IISTL was able to reach more than 700 refugee and immigrant households with these critical messages.

Throughout the balance of the year, more than 25 calls were made, each in eight languages, reaching more than 700 households per topic. The topics ranged from social distancing guidelines, to information about pandemic related financial assistance, to school closings/openerings, to local food resources, to changing IISTL operation hours, and more.

IISTL served as a COVID testing location three times as a result of its partnership with Affinia Healthcare. We also served as a site for flu shots in the fall.

With the tax deadline extended to July 15, 2020, IISTL tax services delivered by our Economic Development department were extended through June. Staff and certified tax preparation counselors conducted tax consultations for 421 clients over the phone and scheduled socially distant document drops at our location.

Beginning in March, IISTL’s Workforce Solutions department began seeing more and more clients returning for employment assistance after being laid off due to the pandemic. Beginning in April, Workforce Solutions staff pivoted to focus on helping applicants access standard and PUA unemployment benefits. Meanwhile, they continued to assist laid off and new clients find employment. In spite of the economic downturn, staff placed 284 clients in jobs at an average starting salary of $13.86/hour, an 11% increase from 2019.

To help students continue their learning, Education department staff and teachers met with clients outside to install apps on their devices. Teachers also developed asynchronous learning strategies including production of YouTube videos. Curriculum has been offered in this manner since March 2020. During the year, 257 clients attended mostly virtual English classes.

Special grants from St. Mary’s Institute of O’Fallon, Lutheran Foundation of St. Louis, Ameren, and other sources enabled Institute staff to continue to provide essential services during the COVID emergency. Meanwhile, funds from United Way, City of St. Louis CARES Act, US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, Missouri Office of Refugee Administration, Marillac Mission Fund, and others provided rent, mortgage and utility assistance, PPE, food cards, and more.
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