



# SHARED STRENGTH

Refugee Development Center  
2022 Annual Report





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Every newcomer  
brings their own  
unique experiences  
and perspectives  
to our community  
— and we are all  
stronger as a result.

## Introduction

For the first time on record, there are more than 100 million displaced people in the world.

With 89.3 million people displaced in 2021, the Ukraine war has pushed the number of people forced to flee their homes over 100 million. The numbers reflect the conflict in Ukraine as well as ongoing conflict and disaster in countries such as Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia, Venezuela and beyond.

Overall, the number of displaced persons has more than doubled in the last ten years alone.

Our community has long been a welcoming haven for new refugee arrivals, and the Refugee Development Center (RDC) has been here for more than 20 years to welcome newcomers with open arms — whether they have arrived through traditional refugee resettlement or a myriad of other new pathways such as Operation Allies Welcome for Afghan arrivals, or United 4 Ukraine, or newer humanitarian parole and community sponsorship programs.

No matter how people arrive, we welcome them warmly and respond to the emerging needs

they have to ensure barriers are limited, services are accessible and all newcomers are able to thrive.

In 2022, the RDC responded to the sudden influx of new arrivals from Afghanistan after the fall of Kabul. Our community welcomed 300 Afghan arrivals in a few short months. We shifted our services to locations close to where these new arrivals were living and we opened our Center most hours of the day and included whole family programming to ensure all were welcomed.

We also expanded programming in response to collaborative planning with our cultural broker team. Cultural brokers are individuals who come from refugee and immigrant backgrounds who work on staff at the RDC as a liaison, a cultural guide and a catalyst for change to promote more equitable collaboration and planning. Our new navigation program has blossomed from the careful planning with our cultural broker team and is directly informed by the families we work with each day. Thanks to an incredible outpouring of financial support, this year we were able to hire a full-time

housing navigator and a full-time health navigator. This has been a very popular service for families and has provided much needed support for more than 300 individuals in its first year.

We have expanded our youth programming to focus on early literacy for our youngest learners. We hired a trained early childhood specialist and created a robust program with a variety of activities designed to improve school readiness and early literacy skills for multilingual learners. We also offer a home visiting component where parents and their children learn alongside one another to build a strong foundation of literacy skills for a successful school experience.

At the RDC, the tapestry of programs we offer serves as a safe landing place for the newest arrivals and long-time residents alike. We will continue to ensure that every newcomer has the resources and support they need to make Lansing their home. Every newcomer brings their own unique experiences and perspectives to our community — and we are all stronger as a result.



## A Letter from the Executive Director

Since our founding in 2002, the Refugee Development Center has provided services for newcomer families to help them thrive and help mid-Michigan become home. Our work is broad and responsive because we know that every family arrives in our community with different needs and these needs are never static. Upon arrival, newcomers face unique barriers and need assistance to learn the language, navigate systems, and acclimate to their new community. The RDC exists to reduce these barriers and support newcomers on their journey to finding home in mid-Michigan.

Our region is more vibrant and strong because of our rich history of resettlement and welcoming. We have learned so much, we've grown, evolved and adapted our services to meet the needs of new families. Listening is

at the core of our work and our services are a reflection of learning from the families we serve. With the help of our cultural broker leadership team, we have listened to our families about their biggest challenges and needs.

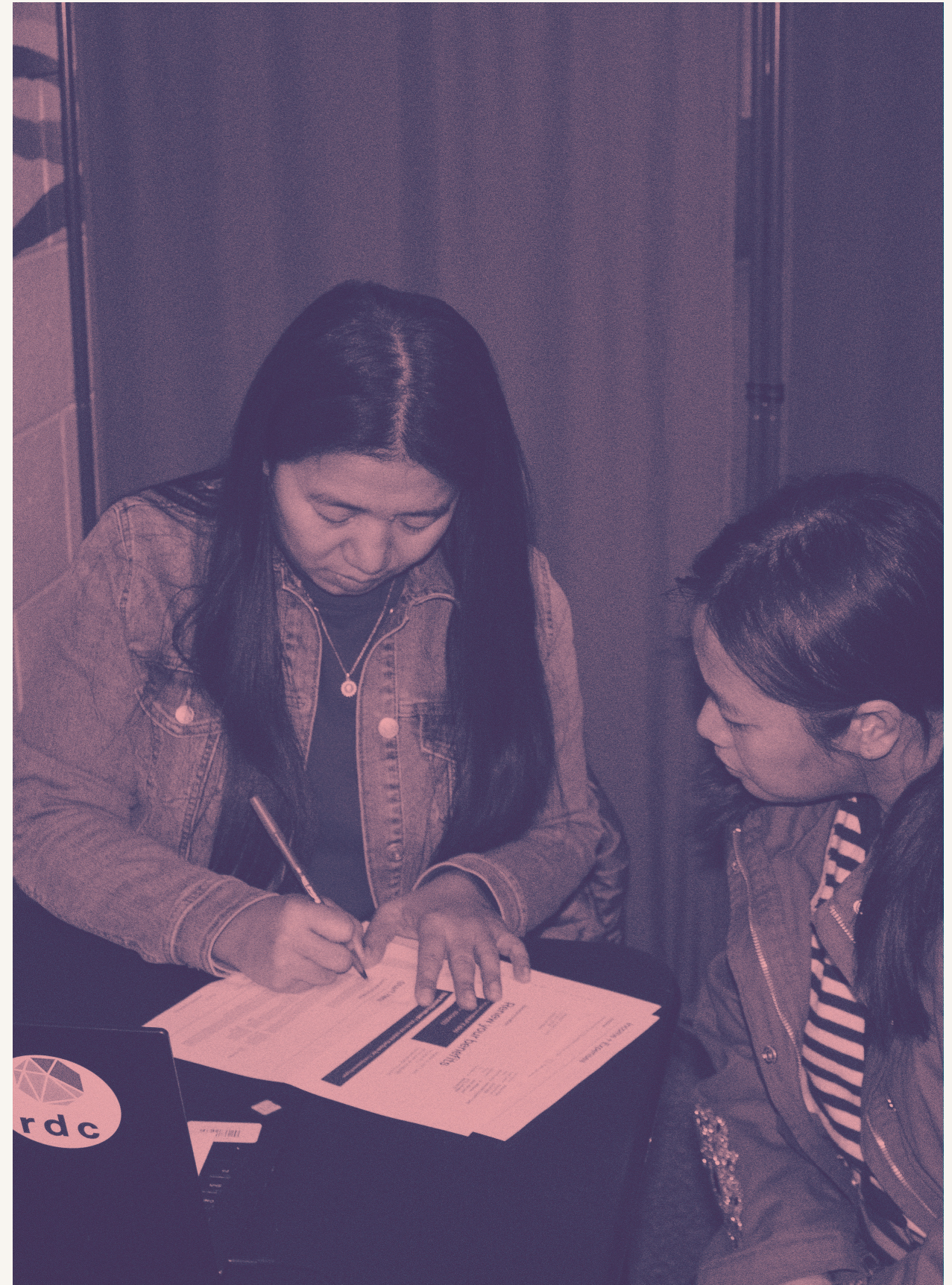
This year, after several years of distance learning, we heard that families wanted a place for the whole family to learn and connect. So, we opened our doors and expanded our programming to encompass learners of all ages and we enhanced our scope of programming to include citizenship, driving, wellness, housing and health. Woven into our program model is a rich tapestry of diverse services designed alongside refugee newcomers to welcome the whole family, tap into their strengths and assist them on their pathway to success. For example, while one family

member could be learning to drive, another could be in our English class, another in our early literacy programming, and another meeting with her mentor to discuss college. Together, these programs encompass our mission to cultivate welcoming.

Over the past 21 years, the RDC has responded to the changing needs of newcomers who have made Lansing home. We know mid-Michigan will continue to be a welcoming haven for newcomers from all over the world.

Thank you to the thousands of newcomers, supporters, volunteers, and friends who have helped shape our work and deepen our impact.

**Erika Brown-Binion**  
Executive Director,  
Refugee Development Center



The Refugee Development Center  
cultivates a welcoming, thriving  
community that collaborates with  
refugees and newcomers through  
education, engagement and support.

# Our Organization

••• = Services for all ages

○ = Services for youths

## WHO WE ARE

Our staff and our board of directors passionately believe in building a welcoming, thriving community here in greater Lansing. We are not alone. We know our team of supporters includes dedicated volunteers who show up alongside us each week, newcomer neighbors who bravely share their stories and dreams, community partners who willingly learn and respond with us to current needs, and the network of generous individuals and groups who give financially to our operations. Together, we all contribute to our mission.

## WHAT WE DO

All newcomers are welcome at the RDC. Our tapestry of program offerings is designed to offer interwoven, individualized support to each newcomer, along with their family members, for as long as they choose. Across all programs, you'll see our team incorporating joyful moments and encouraging wellness, creating welcoming environments for student connection, and offering mindfully designed lessons within a culturally responsive framework.

## Administration

Leading the organization in its mission and values with strategic planning and oversight.

## Program Management

Maintaining streamlined data and reporting systems to ensure quality service delivery and need and impact reporting.

## Outreach

Building an informed and engaged network of stakeholders through community education and volunteerism while continuously advocating for culturally responsive services within strategic partnerships.

## Development

Collaborating with local, state, and federal supporters to meet critical needs and increase our impact.

## Student Support

Providing preschool aged, and post secondary young people with cultural integration, academic, and linguistic support.

- Tutoring
- Mentoring
- College & Career Readiness
- English Lessons
- Summer Camp
- Support Groups
- Early Literacy Programs
- Homevisits

## English Language Instruction

Offering daytime and evening courses for English language learners, including classes that focus on civics, workforce skills, and cultural integration.

- Emergent to Advanced Classes
- In-person & Online Options
- Technology Integration
- Tutoring
- Workforce Development
- Career Pathways
- Homevisits

## Digital Literacy

Supporting families with their technology skills to improve career opportunities, academic success and life skills.

- Computer Classes
- In-home Instruction
- Device Distribution
- Internet Access
- Self-paced Online Lessons
- Career Exploration
- Homevisits

## Family Engagement

Partnering with families to promote academic success and successful integration.

- Program Enrollment
- Cultural Brokers
- Interpretation/Translation
- Case Management
- School Enrollment
- School Tours & Orientations
- Community Referrals
- Homevisits

## Navigation

Connecting families with resources to meet their healthcare, household, and wellbeing needs.

- Housing Insecurity Interventions
- Financial Literacy & Counseling
- Home Ownership Education & Planning
- Health Insurance Enrollment
- Health Care Education
- Food Assistance
- Driving Simulator
- Computer Lab
- Wellness Support Groups
- Homevisits

## OUR VALUES

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**Education:** We believe in education as a catalyst for community engagement and action.

**Compassion:** We model empathy by encouraging and supporting people's self-efficacy and strengths.

**Collaboration:** We are committed to working in collaboration with newcomers and community partners, knowing that we are stronger together.

**Welcoming:** We seek to engage new and longtime residents as neighbors to foster an open and inclusive community where all people's gifts are valued.

### **Cultural Humility and Inclusion:**

We firmly believe in the equal value of all humans and the importance of respecting and honoring each individual.

**Innovation:** We are committed to responsive services and continuous learning. We are open to new ideas, and to discovering better ways to assist with emerging and unmet needs.

**Commitment:** We value the passion and contributions of our staff, board of directors, volunteers, community partners and newcomers in creating a just and welcoming community.



## OUR HISTORY

The Refugee Development Center (RDC) is a grassroots organization offering formal and informal learning opportunities in an open and inclusive setting. The RDC opened in 2002 because the Greater Lansing community identified service area gaps for newcomer populations seeking self-sufficiency. The common denominator in the gaps identified revolved around education, and hence, the mission of the center was born. Today, the RDC helps serve as the link between newcomer populations and the private, public and faith-based communities in mid-Michigan.

## DONATE

Our work is made possible by the generosity of our supporters. As a donor, your gift stays local, supporting the newcomers who strengthen and enrich our community. To give back to the Refugee Development Center, visit [refugeedevelopmentcenter.org/en/donate](https://refugeedevelopmentcenter.org/en/donate).

## VOLUNTEER

Our people make us strong. Over the years, we've established a dedicated community of volunteers who have a shared passion for both educating and learning from newcomers. To learn more about volunteer opportunities with the Refugee Development Center, contact us at [info@rdclansing.org](mailto:info@rdclansing.org).





## SILAS

Kabo, Central African Republic

Farmer & Entrepreneur

## Sowing the Seeds for a Strong Future

Silas’s journey is one of perseverance, determination and a dream. Born in Central African Republic, he was forced to flee his home country due to war and violence. Silas spent 12 years living in a refugee camp in Chad before he finally had the opportunity to move to the United States.

After living in Massachusetts for three years, Silas decided to move to Lansing where he felt there were more opportunities available for him and his family to start a business. “Here in Lansing, Michigan, is where I want to live for a while,” Silas says. “I appreciate being here and have learned new things and met new people.”

In Lansing, Silas has worked hard to make his lifelong farming dreams a reality. “I come from an agricultural background. I was born on a farm and studied agriculture in Africa,” Silas says. “We grew up with goats, chickens, dogs, cows, all kinds of things. Today, I dream of owning a farm and

my own land. I want to have my own business, be my own boss and give my contribution to my community.”

Silas has an evident drive to learn. He attended college for two years in Africa, and speaks eight different languages. Silas is determined to build on this educational foundation and provide his five children with the best opportunities available. “I want my kids to have success,” he says. “My father said he missed out on his own education, and told me that I have to go to school, because school is the way to achieve success. He is the one who taught me how to work.”

A driven individual, Silas is not content simply sitting back and waiting for things to happen – he is eager to put in the work necessary to bring his aspirations to fruition. Silas says Nichole Hoerner, Family Engagement and Data Director at the RDC, has been instrumental in helping him and his family adjust to life in the United States.

“Before I came here, I did not know about the programs that were available at the RDC,” he says. “Nichole has helped me with everything. She has opened my eyes to see what’s possible, and has connected me with people and programs. She helped my family enroll in school and tutors my son after school. She is even the coach for my son on the Newcomers soccer team.”

Despite the challenges he has faced, Silas continues to work toward his dream to improve his family’s future. He has a positive attitude and is always eager to uplift others. “It doesn’t matter what color you are or where you came from,” he says. “Everyone is a human being. Whatever you are. Who you are. If you need help, I’ll help you. I want to help you.”

“It doesn’t matter what color you are  
or where you came from. Everyone  
is a human being. Whatever you are.  
Who you are. If you need help,  
I’ll help you. I want to help you.”



## DAYFRAN

Caracas, Venezuela

Educator & Advocate

## Taking a Stand and Finding Home

Born in Caracas, Venezuela in 1994, Dayfran was the son of immigrants from Portugal and Spain and the oldest of four children. He attended a bilingual school from a young age, where he was raised speaking and reading English. Dayfran later earned a bachelor's degree in sociology in Venezuela.

It was Dayfran's passion for political activism that eventually led him to the United States. After graduating college, he became deeply involved in political movements and debates. "We were demonstrating against fraudulent elections and police brutality," Dayfran recalls. "I began voicing concerns about the government and the outcomes of the 2016 demonstrations, where many college students were killed. Many students were sent to jail, and there were many demonstrations throughout the country. It was an unsafe environment for many college students."

When the Venezuelan government pushed back against student demonstrators, Dayfran

found himself threatened and forced to flee the country. "I had a teaching job and, after work one day, I was followed to my home by government officials," he says. "I had a gun pointed to my head and they threatened my life and the lives of my family. That was on a Monday, and I left the country on a Wednesday. I flew to Nashville to be with my uncle who had been living there for three years." Later, he applied for political asylum in the United States. The process is still ongoing, and Dayfran is awaiting a court date.

Looking for a welcoming, smaller community and a chance to start anew, Dayfran found himself moving to Lansing. "I had a friend in Lansing who told me about a job opening at the Refugee Development Center and I applied while I was living in Nashville," he explains. Dayfran now works as a Volunteer Coordinator and Youth Educator at the RDC, where he enjoys working with children, providing them with a safe space and an escape from life's difficulties.

"What I see at the RDC is a helping hand," Dayfran says. "I have a masters degree, speak five languages, and have traveled the world – but when I landed in the United States, I was still so scared and terrified about how I would survive. The RDC team made me feel at home. Even the small stuff meant so much. It really is a helping hand and a welcoming space for all."

Dayfran has come to appreciate Lansing as his home, too. "At first, I thought Lansing would be more boring and calmer compared to Caracas and Nashville. I am surprised that Lansing is as vivid as Caracas. I'm so glad I can walk to get groceries or a haircut or to take my dog on a walk. Lansing is just so welcoming and mildly fast paced, just enough."

As Dayfran says, he is an open book: eager to share his story and his love for teaching and activism. An inclusive support system can have a monumental impact on an individual's life – something Dayfran has learned firsthand, and is why he dedicates his work to uplifting others.

“What I see at the RDC is a helping hand. It really is a helping hand and a welcoming space for all.”





## YALDA

Kabul, Afghanistan

Community Leader & Educator

## Discovering Talents, and Using Them to Uplift Others

Yalda arrived in the United States with her family at the age of 12 through the refugee resettlement process. As an Afghan immigrant, the transition to a new country was not always easy for her. As she recalls, she struggled with the language, culture, and making friends. But finding the Refugee Development Center and its community eased this transition, and amplified her drive to be a leader.

“The ability to show empathy toward individuals who have recently arrived in America is crucial,” she says. “That’s why the RDC is a place I have personally gotten to know very well over the last five years.”

Yalda became involved in the RDC when she was in the seventh grade, through the RDC’s after-school club and summer camps. “I first began to practice English at the RDC, and I was able to continue working on my English there,” she recalls. During her freshman year of high school, she was one of six high

school students accepted into the RDC’s Young Leaders Program. There, she worked alongside Michigan State University professors and students to create a project that taught young children the importance of leadership.

During her sophomore year, Yalda began volunteering at the RDC’s summer camps, and by junior year, she was helping new refugee arrivals by assisting with interpreting. “I speak four languages, so that was one of the biggest advantages for me – to continue practicing all of the languages, especially my native tongue,” she says. “Being a translator has allowed me to pay it forward and empathize with others who have arrived in the United States.”

Today, Yalda remains a significant contributor to the RDC through her role as a youth leader. Through her involvement, she has not only given back to the community, but also says she has gained valuable

leadership experience and language skills in the process. “As an immigrant, Afghan woman, and future leader, this community has helped me to be a strong, resilient and independent woman through the challenges I have overcome and my strength and sacrifice to persevere through it all,” she says.

Yalda plans to continue her education and pursue her dreams of becoming a leader in her community. And she knows that she will always have the support of the RDC behind her.

As she looks back on her journey, Yalda says she is proud of how far she has come. “Twelve-year-old me would be so proud to see how far I have come, and how far I will continue to go as I pursue a college education,” she says. “To me, the RDC is a place where I have felt at home. It is a place where I’ve found people that have the same story as me, and been able to form everlasting and meaningful relationships.”

“Twelve-year-old me would be so proud to see how far I have come, and how far I will continue to go.”



## YOHANA

Habana, Cuba

Baker & Entrepreneur

## Sharing a Taste of Culture

Those who live in or have visited Lansing are likely familiar with the bright pink food truck in Old Town, Habana Delights. The eatery is known for its authentic Cuban dishes, fresh coffee, and one-of-a-kind pastries – but what people might not know is the dream behind the truck, and the family of immigrants that made it happen.

Yohana arrived in Lansing, Michigan from Cuba with her family eight years ago with the goal to start a business. “I’m a baker, and I love to make cakes,” she says. “It has always been my dream to have a bakery. And so, I started a food truck.”

In 2019, Yohana opened Habana Delights with the hopes of making a space where others would feel at home. “I wanted a place where Cuban people and others could discover this food and this culture,” she says. Since then, the business has grown gradually year-by-year, Yohana says, and brought a piece of Cuba to Lansing.

Yohana says that, upon arrival in Lansing, her husband and two children immediately fell in love with the city. “When we came to Lansing, we were so happy to be here,” she recalls. “It has been so great to us, and we are grateful for this community.” Yohana’s children attended Sexton High School and Lansing Community College, and have now gone on to pursue their own careers.

Still, as Yohana recalls, launching a business in a new country was not always easy. “I knew I had this dream to start the business – but I didn’t know how to do it,” Yohana recalls. She utilized education and resources from the One and All Program with the RDC and the Lansing Economic Area Partnership (LEAP) to fill in the gaps. “The RDC helped me find so much information, and taught me about starting a business,” Yohana says. “They gave me advice about laws and regulations, and connected me with LEAP to help grow my business over time.”

Yohana also credits the support of her husband and two children for helping her through the challenging times, including the COVID-19 pandemic. “We had to adapt and make new things, learning how to change things for the audience,” she recalls. “But I’m so happy to do this – it’s a good problem to have a business to manage everyday. And my family has helped me so much.”

Today, Yohana hopes to expand her business beyond the food truck and open her own bakery with a permanent location. “There are many things I will have to face to make this happen,” she says. “But if I want it, I will have to fight for it every day. And I will do that for sure. Thank God I’m here in the United States. I think it’s one of the best places in the whole world -- it gave me the opportunity to have my dreams and build a better life for my family.”

**“If I want it,  
I will have to fight  
for it every day.  
And I will do that  
for sure.”**





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Rochelle Gordon  
Ryler Dustin  
Suzanne Fischer  
Theresa Rathwell  
Tim Lane  
Yvette Collard  
Zach Sebree

## FUNDERS

ACCESS  
AF Group  
All Saints Episcopal Church  
Anonymous Foundation  
Capital Region Community Foundation  
Central Free Methodist Church  
City of Lansing  
Clarkston United Methodist Church  
Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity  
Eastminster Presbyterian Church, East Lansing  
Hello Neighbor  
Ingham County  
Junior League of Lansing  
Jackson  
Lansing Common  
Lansing Community College  
Lansing Economic Area Partnership  
Michigan State University  
Office of Global Michigan  
Okemos Community Church  
Redhead Creative Consultancy  
United Way of South Central Michigan  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing  
Welcome U.S.  
Williamston Rotary

*And many generous community partners!*

## BOARD

John "Jack" Roberts, President  
Robin Lynn Grinnell, Vice President  
Sam Singh, Treasurer  
Vincent Delgado, Secretary  
Carol Conn, Member  
Racha Kardahji, Member  
Candy Kokinakis, Member  
Jessica Martin, Member  
Fathy Shetiah, Member  
Scott Zulewski, Member

**IN 2022, THE RDC WORKED WITH:**



**1,113 Newcomers**

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**60 Countries of Origin**

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**75 Languages**





**447**  
English Students

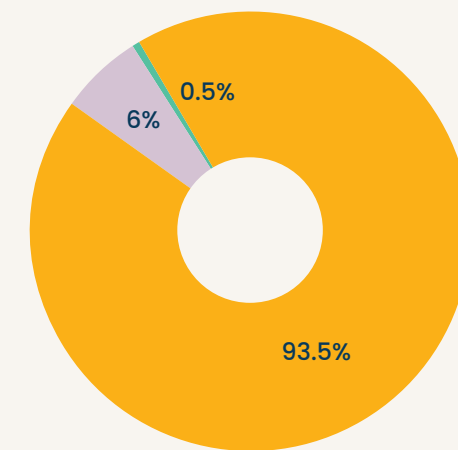
**239**  
Volunteers

**621**  
Interpretations

**660**  
Home Visits

**183** Digital Literacy Students  
**274** School Orientations  
**975** School Liaison Visits  
**136** Tutoring Students  
**146** Early Literacy Students

**85** Mentoring Students  
**239** Health Navigation Interactions  
**177** Housing Navigation Interactions  
**126** Summer Camp Students  
**104** Drop-In Center



**FUNDING ALLOCATION**

- Programs
- Administration Costs
- Fundraising

As a community, every person, place and organization plays a critical role in building our collective strength. At the Refugee Development Center, we constantly witness the inherent strength of newcomers firsthand. These individuals bring endless skills and perspectives – and with additional support from resources, education and navigation, they add to our community, making it even stronger as a result.

When each element of a structure is stronger, the whole is stronger.

When we have strong partners to lean on, we can share the burden of life's challenges.

And when we uplift others, we uplift everyone.



How to Donate  
[www.rdclansing.org](http://www.rdclansing.org)

How to Volunteer  
[info@rdclansing.org](mailto:info@rdclansing.org)