

Kansas City Reaches Out to Its Immigrant Population

Julie Robinson spent years working in community outreach as manager of Kansas City (Mo.) Public Library's (KCPL) Irene H. Ruiz Biblioteca de las Americas branch in the city's Westside neighborhood, which is home to a large immigrant population. Immigrants and refugees make up almost 7% of the city's population. When KCPL created a new division of its outreach department in 2014 to engage this community, Robinson was a natural choice to lead the department.



Julie Robinson

In her new role as Refugee and Immigrant Services (RIS) manager, Robinson helps the library serve immigrants and refugees from Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Mexico, Myanmar, Somalia, Vietnam, and Central and South American countries. Robinson initially faced challenges connecting with people with limited or no English-speaking skills, so she partnered with resettlement agencies, medical facilities, Kansas City Public Schools, social service agencies, and community groups to gain access to these populations. An advisory board was established to help reach immigrants and refugees and guide the programming and outreach activities.

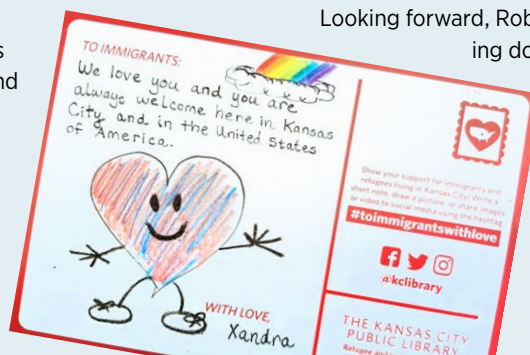
Robinson was joined by two AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers in July 2015 to improve services and programming. KCPL's Immigrant Heritage

series began with a lecture on the H-1B non-immigrant visa, which allows US employers to hire foreign workers in specialty occupations. That was followed by immigrant restaurateurs who showcased their food at a reception. The final event that first year was a panel discussion among immigrants who came to the US by different paths and for different reasons. A January 2016 screening of the documentary *Refugee Kids: One Small School Takes on the World* drew 325 people—half of them immigrants. The final event in November 2016 was a naturalization ceremony for 110 applicants who became US citizens before a standing-room-only crowd of more than 600 people.

After rebranding RIS to RISE (Refugee and Immigrant Services and Empowerment) to stress the library's commitment to refugee and immigrant rights, Robinson and the AmeriCorps volunteers implemented citizenship classes at two KCPL branches, offered digital storytelling programs for immigrant teens, and hosted a *#toimmigrantswithlove* event where more than 1,100 people wrote welcoming postcards, listened to stories about the immigrant experience, and promoted the event on their social media accounts using the hashtag. They also provided cultural competency training for library staffers and created a video that is now part of new employee orientation at KCPL.

Looking forward, Robinson is working on a welcoming document to assist KCPL staff in

ascertaining immigrants' and refugees' library needs. By 2018, KCPL will offer assistance to immigrants on their path to citizenship by having citizenship advocates in the library. ●



ing refugees from entering the US for 120 days and immigrants from seven predominantly Muslim nations from entering for 90 days had just been halted by a federal judge.

Learning from libraries outside the US

The summit began by looking outward to gather insight and perspectives from librarians in countries that have received

large numbers of refugees to see how they assist the newcomers to their communities. Sulekha Sathi, library service manager for the Agincourt branch of Toronto Public Library, and Anne

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