

Fatima Bamba ([00:00](#)):

Okay, so to begin, we sort of... First of all, thank you again for joining us. And speaking to us, our last conversation was incredibly insightful. And to sort of the work that you do, the work that Ashley does, and we really wanted to sort of get more specific about some of the things that we talked about last time. And I know a few of the things we spoke about was about the sense of community that Asylee builds and how you all maintain a sense of family almost, with your clients, workers, and volunteers. And so we sort of wanted to discuss a little bit more about what community looks like or recap what community looks like now with social distancing, with coronavirus and what that looks like now, what it looks... how it's changed, how it's different and how that might affect what things look like in the future. Not just now.

Tiffany Nelms ([01:09](#)):

Yeah, that's a really good question. That's a really good question. So I think we're trying to navigate that too, because it's hard to kind of recreate that dynamic that we have in person with people. So we've moved our classes online, but now we're in the place where we have class, we have the same programming, the English and the computer class and the cultural orientation, and people are really happy to see one another on the camera and talk and chat, but it's not the same as being physically present in the same space.

Tiffany Nelms ([01:56](#)):

[inaudible 00:01:56] does a lot of that. The community building that we do, women holding other women's babies or feeding somebody else's child that's about community, but also a little bit of breastfed for our participants, who many of them are single parents. They are still missing that. And so while they have that connection virtually, it is not the same. And we recognize that we're not going to be back together again until there's a vaccine, which will be months from now. And maybe the fallout from some of that is this... The more exacerbated symptoms of PTSD and things that they were already experiencing when we were all together in person. But one of the key components of resilience for people who are experiencing PTSD is being part of a supportive community. And so I would say the way that manifests itself and how the symptoms of their PTSD, anxiety, depression looks different now than it did before. And we are still connecting people to mental health services. But again, those are also all being done virtually. And so there's a real sense of loss over that human connection all the way around.

Fatima Bamba ([03:36](#)):

Thank you for that. So just on that note, we sort of wanted to ask in that case, I don't know if it would be applicable in this case, but have there been any religious sort of services or customs as far how is Asylee going about celebrating those kinds of things, any markers for important dates that usually around this time people would be in celebration or recognition of?

Tiffany Nelms ([04:06](#)):

Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, we have participants in our program of all faith traditions. And so, for example, during Ramadan, one of the big things in our program is that we have a communal lunch. We sit together. So even if there's not a language in common, women are cooking together, sharing food from their culture, sitting at the same table, feeding each other's children. So during Ramadan, as an example, we... And the lunch is kind of tied into the day programs. If you're present at the day program, even if you're not going to eat, we want you to be in the dining room, but during Ramadan we make accommodations so that there is another space in another part of the building for the women that

are fasting, that they don't have to be in the kitchen, in the dining room and also creating space for conversation around, why are we fasting? And then, the culture of Iftar, what does that mean? How can we share that together with other women who may have not ever known anyone that was Muslim?

Tiffany Nelms ([05:10](#)):

So we try to create that space. And even... It's interesting, some of our women come from countries where they're in conflict because of their religions. And that does come up occasionally and kind of breaking down those barriers and giving people the space to talk about their beliefs and not so much... It's not that one is more right than the other, but by creating a neutral space where they can talk to each other, which, if you're coming from a country, that's at war over religion and other things, you don't necessarily have that space, that safe space. Very rarely we have asylum seekers for example that... They're fleeing persecution based on their sexual orientation or their gender identity. So something like that will spark protest by another participant because of their religious beliefs. And certainly while we respect people's beliefs and backgrounds, we are always very clear that you don't have the right to infringe on somebody else's beliefs. And we don't want to recreate that.

Tiffany Nelms ([06:40](#)):

We don't want somebody who's transgender, for example, to come into our program and feel persecuted by somebody else from their same country who feels like they're going to help because of their own religious beliefs. So how do we create the space to talk about it while still making sure everyone feels safe and welcome? And that can be a little tricky to navigate, but I find that opening the conversation up to the community about... If something happened, what happened? How did you feel? How did the next person feel? And usually they draw a connection to "that's how I felt in my country". So we try to monitor those things really closely because above all our program has to be a safe space. It has to be.

Fatima Bamba ([07:27](#)):

In that case I'm assuming then there's a great deal of facilitation, maybe conflict resolution, training and competency that either yourself or other members, employees that Asylee ave to have at least at a basic level.

Tiffany Nelms ([07:56](#)):

Yeah. I would say we do. We also partner with an organization that provides mental health services and they're in our building too. So they support that effort. But because we really try to make this... We're just a part of the community. And that's how we differ from a traditional social service model is that we're not the expert, the authority, we are a piece of this community. And so I find that when things like this happen, opening it up to the wider community of participants and volunteers to help facilitate that conversation or those conversations. I feel like we make more progress because it's more powerful for somebody who's been persecuted to call out somebody else and saying, "You know, what? What you're doing to that person, because they're transgender is what was done to you because of your political opinion."

Tiffany Nelms ([08:56](#)):

So yeah, as a staff, we try to also be mindful of always kind of taking the role of leader or authority facilitator. But certainly there are times where we do have to do that. I think also creating space for dialogue before something happens. For example, to go back to the example, we've had a few

transgender women and even from the beginning saying, "Do you want to share anything about yourself? What do you want to share? How do you want to do that?". Because sometimes it's a bias and sometimes it's just that people haven't known anyone that's transgender. So how can we facilitate a conversation in a positive way before something happens? So everybody feels more familiar, but it's a lot of work. I mean, we have a big community and people coming in and out always, but.

Fatima Bamba ([10:12](#)):

Okay. Yeah. To follow up on that, I sort of wanted to ask, like you said, you do have a big community and obviously one of the most difficult parts and prevalent parts of COVID is sort of dealing with not only people getting sick, but unfortunately people passing on and I'm not sure if Asylee has had to deal with any loss within a community. But if so, we sort of wanted to hear a little bit about how either members of the community are coping, clients, employees, more sorts of rituals to honor people that have passed or what kinds of support to sort of aid people mourning and what that looks like within the community.

Tiffany Nelms ([11:07](#)):

Yeah. That's a good question. And it's something that we, certainly during COVID, it takes a little bit of a different form, but when you work with people who come from countries that are at war, then we have people very often in normal times that their brother is kidnapped or murdered or their spouse has been disappeared or... So this loss is also complicated by being far away, you don't have the support of your family and you don't necessarily know what's happened to your relative. You know, there's not going to be any justice. So dealing with all of those things is very challenging. And then of course, kind of the survivor's guilt that goes along with "I was able to escape, I'm pursuing asylum. I will eventually be able to stay here long-term and be safe, but everybody I left in my home country doesn't have that luxury".

Tiffany Nelms ([12:14](#)):

So I think, our partner Intercultural Counseling Connection, they do a weekly therapeutic group, which incorporates also a lot of movement, dance and music. But I think that that... And they also provide individual counseling, but that mutual support women who understand exactly what you're going through, even if they can't do anything to change it, to have people around you through that period, but at the end of the day, and we tell people "we can't change or make that better, but we can stand with you while you're going through this". And it's a long, long process. I mean, we have women who are two or three years into their asylum case, but they're survivors of the Rwandan genocide and 20+ years later, you still see the impact every day in that person's ability to function. Even on a very basic level. This is not like getting over a divorce or having a parent or somebody close to you die of natural causes or a disease.

Tiffany Nelms ([13:26](#)):

I mean, this is what they call complex PTSD, right? It's trauma experience over a long period of time or multiple exposures to trauma that most of us born in the US have no real understanding of. And then with COVID, I would say that quite a few of our women come from countries where their families have very limited access to medical care either because of their lack of financial resources, or there's just not the infrastructure in their country to provide anything other than very basic healthcare. And even then they don't the supplies they need to provide that. And the feelings of helplessness, I would say that's kind of a common theme. People are really scared for their families and also kind of the triggering their own trauma. A number of our women are from countries where they're on complete lockdown. You can go out one day a week to go to the store for three hours. And other than that, you can't leave your

house. And when you come from a country that's been at war, you've experienced that same kind of thing, even though it's for a different reason, it kind of takes you back mentally to that place.

Tiffany Nelms ([14:57](#)):

So it's hard. There's really no good solution. I mean, there's no solution other than creating a space for them to talk about it with each other, support one another.

Fatima Bamba ([15:13](#)):

One of the things that I think it's interesting is often, at least in the discourse of sort of trauma, we're also an advisor you hear often about how to find joy and how to find sort of little moments or tidbits, or sort of happiness or relief to help cope. And I think sometimes, and in the case of your organization, honestly, the reality is that you might not necessarily be able to find joy, but what you can do is to sort of help people cope and ride the wave of whatever it is they're experiencing, whether it's trauma or they're mourning, difficulty in whatever sense. Sometimes not necessarily finding the joy, it's just helping people take it day by day. Yeah. And so, as you're speaking, I'm thinking about how Asylee is just helping people really survive day by day, and how some things really are almost too difficult to sort of make better. You can't really make it all better all the time.

Tiffany Nelms ([16:32](#)):

Yeah, that's true. And I feel like there were still lots of moments of joy and it's just kind of reinforcing that it's okay. All of this stuff is happening to you and you don't need to feel guilty about having these moments of joy.

Fatima Bamba ([16:51](#)):

Yeah, that's true too. That's true as well. A few more questions we wanted to know. So, and we just wanted to make sure we have an accurate sense of all of the resources Asylee provide this members to cope, right? Especially in this time of coronavirus. So you have your mental health services. People are provided with food, essentials. People are provided with legal help, often, classes, right? Meetings. Now, I guess a virtual sense of community. We want to make sure we're not leaving anything else out.

Tiffany Nelms ([17:40](#)):

Yeah. And we do partner, like you said, with the mental health service provider, Intercultural Counseling Connection, we partner with Health Care for the Homeless, so people can have their physical health needs addressed. In another part of our... and we offer the English and the job readiness and the cultural orientation. We also have a garden in the back and we have a vegetable garden in the back, a therapeutic garden in the front with flowers and benches and fountains and things. We do during normal times, social gatherings, outings. We always have a end of summer picnic at the beach. These kind of normal everyday things that people do that certainly we're missing right now, but healing comes in many different forms. And so, we try to offer different kinds of spaces to do that. And for some of our ladies, it's planting vegetables that they're familiar with from their country. And doing that every day for four-five months and sharing with the community, what the vegetable is and how you cook it. And that can be as therapeutic for one woman as going to counseling is for another. It's kind of created a very broad view of what is therapeutic.

Tiffany Nelms ([19:19](#)):

Yeah.

Fatima Bamba ([19:22](#)):

Yeah. I'm going to... Just, before we ask the last question in mind, is there anything else you'd like to hear more about anything I'm missing?

Iman AbdoulKarim ([19:36](#)):

Yeah, no, I think that's great. I think something that... I know we touched on a little bit in the beginning about how members are not necessarily eligible for a lot of the government resources. So I would say maybe, I think it would be great to hear a little bit more about kind of like the government's response to COVID and how your organization is working to fill those gaps. If you feel like there's not anything, I mean, including all the vast resources you guys provide, but if there's anything that you've had to wrap up in the meantime. I know that you guys are talking with medical professionals and doing that sort, but if there's anything else that would be for sure.

Tiffany Nelms ([20:23](#)):

Yeah. I'll have to be careful to be diplomatic here. A lot of resources are based on someone's immigration status. And so asylum seekers they're allowed to be here. And then it often takes years for there to be a decision on their case. So we say, you're allowed to be here. You're allowed to apply this, but we're not going to have an answer for you for a couple of years. And in the meantime, you're not eligible for anything and you can't work and good luck. I mean, during a pandemic. And it's also in the interest of the public health to provide the same resources and safety net for people who have this legal status, that's kind of in limbo so that they're not forced to work in the informal economy when they're sick, potentially exposing other people to the virus. But they're not eligible for food stamps, they're not eligible for cash assistance.

Tiffany Nelms ([21:31](#)):

They're not eligible for the stimulus that the rest of us got, they're not eligible for unemployment. And so I think I had higher expectations, especially given that this virus disproportionately impacts immigrants and refugees because they live often multiple families or people under the same roof. They're in very close quarters. Often, especially in urban areas, relying on public transportation, because they can't get a license. They don't have money for a car. And they've really been left out of all of these programs to keep the rest of us afloat. So that is very disappointing. This is not a situation that we're dealing with for a month or two. I mean, this has already gone on for five months and will likely go on for five more months. So though that population is just incredibly vulnerable. So we could certainly do better.

Fatima Bamba ([22:49](#)):

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Anything else, Iman?

Iman AbdoulKarim ([22:58](#)):

No, I think we've covered it.

Fatima Bamba ([23:02](#)):

Yeah. So in that case, thank you for speaking to us. I mean, if there's anything else at all, you want us to know about Asylee, feel free, but if not, thank you so much for taking the time to really speak to us about your work. The work you do is amazing, it's important, and I know it's of great benefit to your wider community. So thank you for allowing us to first document this work and to provide it publicly in our archive. That's much appreciated, but again, yeah. If there's anything last minute, you'd love for us to know about Asylee. Feel free.

Tiffany Nelms ([23:47](#)):

Yeah. Thank you so much for doing this. I'm really... It's been nice talking to both of you and I guess one just kind of tidbit from today. I think there's a shared concern about just things happening that kind of undermine the infrastructure of our country. An example of how much harder these things impact people like asylum seekers, immigrants, refugees, USPS is really in a crisis right now. Mail is significantly delayed and the administration is implementing a new change. So in the past, asylum seekers could apply for work permit five months after they submitted their asylum application. And there's a change going into effect on August 25th, that if you haven't filed before then, most people will not be able to get a work permit. And so Homeland Security has said, "If you're seeking asylum, you should just get used to being homeless, find out your homelessness services in your community because you won't get a work permit. You'll have to wait until there's a decision on your case, which could be years". So we've been in this big push with volunteer attorneys to get all this paperwork submitted before August the 24th.

Tiffany Nelms ([25:11](#)):

And so this morning before I had my call with you... UPS won't ship to a post office box. So our hope was we'd go to UPS, ship these important documents, so they could get their overnight mail, but they don't ship to post office box, which is where all these applications go. And the postal service is taking weeks. And so you're dealing with people who are trying to do the right thing. They're trying to submit their paperwork. The postal service is in a shambles, which is not their fault, but the implication is that, the consequence of that is that some of these people are going to lose out on the ability to work and likely end up homeless for two years until there's a decision on their asylum case, because the very basic systems in our country are not functioning that have nothing to do with immigration.

Tiffany Nelms ([26:05](#)):

So as frustrating and inconvenient as it has been for me to not get my mail regularly, but what the impact on a single mom seeking asylum from Cameroon is huge and just makes life much harder than it needs to be. So, yeah, we're seeing this impact all over, in many different ways, but yeah. So I want to add that little tidbit.

Fatima Bamba ([26:40](#)):

Yeah. Thank you for that. I mean, yeah, I can imagine. Yeah, lots of craziness happening so I can imagine how it affects your daily operations and real life can real lives, real lives, real people. It was just another reminder that some of the decisions that are made higher up, all of them really affect real people and real lives. And often it is life and death. It's a matter of people's livelihoods and their wellbeing.

Tiffany Nelms ([27:20](#)):

Yeah. For sure. Definitely.

This transcript was exported on Apr 20, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

Fatima Bamba ([27:23](#)):

Yeah. Thank you so, so much for speaking to us.

Tiffany Nelms ([27:25](#)):

Thank you all.

Iman AbdoulKarim ([27:26](#)):

I thank you so much, Tiffany. And we'll be in touch if there's any maybe follow up questions, over email or anything like that, but thank you so much for making the time when I know that you are so busy.

Tiffany Nelms ([27:38](#)):

Yeah. It's great to see you both. Good luck with your studies.

Fatima Bamba ([27:41](#)):

Thank you.

Iman AbdoulKarim ([27:41](#)):

Thank you.

Tiffany Nelms ([27:42](#)):

Okay. Bye.

Fatima Bamba ([27:42](#)):

Bye.

Iman AbdoulKarim ([27:42](#)):

Bye-bye.

Fatima Bamba ([27:50](#)):

I am trying to pause this recording. Work with me, work with me, work with me.