



## ARCAMIND & IRC ATLANTA

# Expanding Mental Health Access for Immigrants

## Challenge

For over 40 years, IRC Atlanta has been a beacon of hope for immigrants and refugees, helping more than 30,000 people from over 65 countries rebuild their lives in Georgia. As part of the globally recognized International Rescue Committee (IRC)—founded in 1933 at Albert Einstein's request—IRC Atlanta provides vital resettlement services, education, workforce development, and community health initiatives to support successful integration. Yet, despite the support IRC Atlanta provides, many immigrants and refugees still face profound challenges.

### Overcoming obstacles

Beyond the trauma of their past that may include fleeing war, persecution, or violence, immigrants often must navigate a complex web of barriers.

- **Family separation**, leaving behind loved ones without knowing when—or if—they'll reunite.
- **Cultural and language barriers** that make daily life, employment, and healthcare access difficult.
- **Adjusting to unfamiliar or sometimes unwelcoming environments**—where discrimination and isolation can add to their struggles.

These stressors don't just make resettlement harder—they take a profound toll on mental health. **Anxiety and depression are common, yet immigrants are far less likely to seek mental health care than nonimmigrants.**

Structural barriers such as financial constraints, lack of insurance, and cultural stigma often prevent them from getting the help they need. Without support, these challenges can deepen, affecting not just individuals but entire families and communities.

## The numbers tell a stark story

- **77% of immigrants who've been in the U.S. for less than five years report unmet mental health needs.**
- **Non-English speakers are disproportionately affected.**

### Sources:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/09/27/key-findings-about-us-immigrants/>

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5122453/>

<https://healthpolicy.ucla.edu/newsroom/blog/californias-newest-immigrants-had-biggest-increase-serious-psychological-distress-between-2015-2021>

<https://www.rescue.org/>

# Solution

To address the need for accessible mental health care within refugee communities, **ArcaMind and The New School partnered with IRC Atlanta to deliver Group Problem Management Plus (PM+)**—a low-intensity psychological intervention designed to strengthen community resilience and expand access to mental health support. This initiative exemplifies ArcaMind's commitment to scalable, culturally-responsive mental health solutions that build local capacity and reach underserved communities.

## Training and implementation

To ensure a seamless and impactful implementation of the PM+ program, **ArcaMind conducted an in-depth training session for a select group of eight IRC Atlanta staff members**, including both mental health professionals and non-mental health staff.

IRC Atlanta specifically requested this training as a foundation for equipping their team to deliver Group PM+ sessions to a cohort of Spanish-speaking clients, recognizing that the group format would resonate best with the community's culturally-oriented nature.

Because an interpreter was essential to the program, ArcaMind adjusted the typical five-session format, extending it to eight sessions. This modification allowed enough time for interpretation, ensuring that language barriers would not affect the program's impact.

**Through this collaboration, ArcaMind and IRC Atlanta successfully implemented a culturally competent and effective Group PM+ program**, meeting the unique mental health needs of this Spanish-speaking community. This particular program consisted of Group PM+ participants meeting together with the facilitator to work through the sessions and support each other in solving their most significant mental health problems.

**ArcaMind, the Global Institute for Mental Health Solutions, in partnership with The New School, offers capacity-building programs rooted in evidence-based interventions developed by the World Health Organization (WHO).**

*"Refugees face enormous adjustments, often leading to feelings of overwhelm," said Khatiwada. "In the midst of these challenges, it's easy to overlook simple yet effective ways to support one's well-being. Group PM+ not only reinforces these strategies but also fosters connection. Many participants initially feel isolated, but hearing from others with similar experiences helps build a sense of belonging and support. This program has been instrumental in providing much-needed reflection and community for those navigating these transitions."*

**—Sharita Khatiwada**  
Mental Health and Psychosocial Counselor, IRC Atlanta

## PM+ tools

**Problem-solving**—identifying and addressing stress-causing issues with practical solutions.



**Stress reduction**—using techniques like deep breathing and mindfulness.

**Behavioral activation**—engaging in positive activities to boost mood and well-being.



**Cognitive skills**—challenging negative thoughts with balanced thinking.

**Social support**—sharing experiences and building a supportive community.

**Goal setting**—setting achievable goals to increase motivation and confidence.

“The strength of PM+ lies in its simplicity and accessibility,” Khatiwada added. “The strategies require minimal effort from participants and can be seamlessly integrated into daily routines, even for those experiencing significant stress.”

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**Sharita Khatiwada**  
Mental Health and Psychosocial Counselor  
IRC Atlanta



## Results

The success of the Group PM+ program was evident not only in the immediate outcomes but also in its lasting impact on participants' mental well-being and community connections.

**A follow-up survey revealed that Spanish-speaking cohort members experienced a significant reduction in symptoms of depression and anxiety.** Many expressed an increased sense of confidence in managing stress, problem-solving in their daily lives, and adapting to challenges.

### Extended impact

Beyond individual improvements, the program fostered a strong sense of community among participants. Many reported continuing to support one another outside of the formal sessions—checking in on each other, sharing the coping strategies they learned, and reinforcing the skills that helped them navigate their emotions. This multiplying effect extended beyond the group itself, as participants passed on their knowledge to family members and friends, amplifying the program's benefits throughout their broader social networks.

**Encouraged by these results, IRC Atlanta is now expanding Group PM+ to serve a cohort of Dari-speaking Afghan women.** Additionally, IRC Atlanta and ArcaMind have collaborated to develop an Individual PM+ model, providing one-on-one mental health support for those who may benefit from a more personalized approach. This adaptation ensures that PM+ remains accessible and impactful across different cultural backgrounds, personal circumstances, and levels of mental health need.

As IRC Atlanta continues to refine and expand its mental health programming, **the success of Group PM+ stands as a testament to the power of community-based interventions.** By combining evidence-based strategies with culturally responsive care, the program is not only transforming individual lives but also strengthening entire communities—one connection at a time.



**Diana Gomez**  
Mental Health Specialist, IRC Atlanta  
(PM+ Interpreter)

*"Within the Hispanic community, acknowledging the need for mental health support can be difficult," said Gomez. "Some clients were hesitant to join at first, but by the end, they expressed deep appreciation for the experience."*

*"Beyond personal growth, PM+ has helped initiate broader conversations about mental health, reducing stigma and increasing awareness," Gomez continued. "Many clients initially believed there was little they could do to improve their mental health due to a lack of knowledge or resources. However, these sessions proved invaluable—not only for them but also for their communities. Many participants shared what they learned with friends and family, allowing the benefits of PM+ to extend well beyond the group setting."*



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