

Weaving Well-being

A New Paradigm for Community Mental Health and Wellness

Executive Summary

March 2023



City of Boston
Immigrant Advancement



Funding and Research Partners



City of Boston
Immigrant Advancement

The City of Boston Mayor's Office for Immigrant Advancement (MOIA) strives to strengthen the ability of immigrants to fully and equitably participate in economic, civic, social, and cultural life in Boston. MOIA also promotes the recognition and public understanding of the contributions of immigrants to the City.



The Leah Zallman Center for Immigrant Health Research (LZC) is a research center at the Institute for Community Health. We are a team of interdisciplinary social science researchers with expertise at the intersection of immigrant, economic, and health justice. We partner with immigrant communities, advocates, policymakers, and social and health systems on actionable research to improve immigrant health and well-being.

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Cover textile created by a Somali Parents Advocacy Center for Education (SPACE) participant

Partner Organizations



The [Asian American Resource Workshop \(AARW\)](#) is a political home for pan-Asian communities in Greater Boston. We are a member-led organization committed to building grassroots power through political education, creative expression, and issue-based and neighborhood organizing.



The [Brazilian Worker Center \(BWC\)](#) is a non-profit organization that capacitates immigrant workers to learn about workplace rights, immigration, and health equity. We empower immigrants with knowledge and skills to promote economic, social, political and racial justice for all.



[chica project](#)'s mission is to close the opportunity divide for Latinas and other Women of Color by empowering them with the skills, confidence, and network necessary to thrive personally and professionally.



[Family Nurturing Center \(FNC\)](#) works with others to build nurturing communities where children are cherished, families are supported, and healthy human development is promoted by all.



[Mutual Aid Eastie \(MAE\)](#), applied for this mini-grant as a member of the **Community Healing Center Project**, which is a collaboration of 20+ community leaders, members, and organizations envisioning an urban oasis for holistic healing and community wellness in the East Boston area.



[Sociedad Latina](#)'s mission is to create the next generation of Latine leaders who are confident, competent, self-sustaining, and proud of their cultural heritage.



The mission of [Somali Parents Advocacy Center for Education \(SPACE\)](#) is to support, educate, empower and inspire parents to be better advocates for their children, more specifically, their children with special needs in schools, in health care, and in the community.

At a Glance:

88% of respondents said that they felt comfortable being themselves in their program

84% said that their program helped them to identify resources to support them in a difficult time

84% said that their program helped them to contribute to the happiness and well-being of others

Executive Summary

It has been nearly three years since COVID-19 disrupted life as we knew it, with immigrant families suffering disproportionately with infection and mortality rates and job losses. Immigrant communities faced added difficulties in accessing culturally appropriate mental health services and shouldering cultural stigma around mental health. Recognizing this reality, many immigrant-led and immigrant-serving organizations in Boston stepped up to add or incorporate mental health activities into their programs to support community members' holistic well-being.

The City of Boston Mayor's Office for Immigrant Advancement (MOIA) acknowledges the leadership of immigrant communities in advancing well-being in Boston. MOIA is committed to weaving well-being into our current patchwork system through systemic, multi-stakeholder actions. As part of this commitment, in March 2022, MOIA invested \$70,000 in a six-month pilot program to improve immigrant mental health, awarding grants to seven organizations who were already offering peer-led, community-based wellness interventions in their communities.

The Leah Zallman Center for Immigrant Health Research (LZC) co-designed and implemented a participatory, exploratory assessment with MOIA and the seven partner organizations from April to October 2022. Findings from participant surveys (n=93) and program leader group interviews (14 interviews with 21 leaders) form the backbone of this report and reinforce the well-established fact that health—and mental health—is largely determined by structural and social determinants.

"[The program] made me comfortable to open up because I can trust the people there. We all share the same values, making it easier for me to tell my story and be open to getting advice."

We identified five program design elements that were consistent across the seven organizations' programs:

1. Framing Mental Health as Skill Building for Holistic Wellness;
2. Trauma-Informed and Culturally Rooted Healing Techniques;
3. Group-Based, Engaging, Age-Appropriate Activities;
4. Community-Embedded, Culturally and Linguistically Responsive, and Interdisciplinary Staff; and
5. Peer-Led, Slow Trust Work that Cultivates Culture.

Staff at the organizations **framed mental health as skill building for holistic wellness**. Program leaders introduced mental health concepts and techniques in a safe and supportive space. For many participants, these programs were the first step in destigmatizing mental health supports.

"I became more aware of my energy, compassion, and mindfulness."

The programs taught and used **trauma-informed and culturally rooted healing techniques** from all over the world, including meditation, support circles, reiki, and group yoga. Participants learned a range of creative coping skills that they could use in their day-to-day lives.

All seven organizations used **group-based, engaging, age-appropriate activities** to support community members' well-being. Program leaders designed their initiatives around a collective model of support, bringing people together to improve their community's mental health.

Program staff were community-embedded, culturally and linguistically responsive, and interdisciplinary.

The positionality of the program leaders created greater trust and familiarity for participants, who felt culturally and linguistically understood.

"It is gratifying to find someone who understands us and helps us in our language."

"The program offers a safe space for me to talk about my thoughts and feelings. It helps to remind me that I am not alone in my struggles."

Participants engaged with one another in **peer-led, slow trust work that cultivates culture**, which is in itself an act of resistance to an assimilationist mindset. Participants ultimately felt more comfortable discussing personal struggles with fellow participants than with family and friends outside the program, knowing others understood their experiences and supported them.

We found promising outcomes in the following two areas from this pilot initiative:

1. Social Integration and Cohesion; and
2. Greater Resilience and Well-being.

Research consistently shows the value of high quality, positive social connections as a key contributor to overall health. These immigrant-led initiatives created **greater social integration and cohesion**. Among survey respondents, **84%** (n=81) said that their program helped them to identify supportive people in their lives or form

"I have no parents to guide me or help me raise my kids. This program really helped me. I have people to ask for help in how to best take care of my kids."

new supportive relationships. Programs connected people with each other in new ways and bridged culturally rooted spaces with existing mental health resources and approaches.

With mental health a taboo topic in many immigrant communities, programs focused on teaching participants skills and tools for **greater resilience and well-being**. Overall, **95%** (n=88) of survey respondents reported learning a skill or practice that would help them get through a difficult time. Many participants shared that they used their new knowledge and skills to support other family and community members.

Participants and program leaders alike expressed a need for programs like this MOIA initiative to continue. People noted meaningful changes in themselves and one another. More long-term research can link these outcomes to clinically recognized improvements in personal or community mental health.

In our envisioned Boston, we have more than enough for everyone to thrive, obtain meaningful work, take vacations, live and eat healthily, access healthcare, pursue education, and support one another. Sustainable change will require the conscious involvement of multiple stakeholders.

We recommend the following priorities for action:

1. Invest in community-led, culturally and linguistically accessible safe spaces;
2. Enhance immigrant economic security;
3. Improve immigrant access to clinical and crisis supports; and
4. Advance equity in decision-making for immigrant health program design, implementation, and evaluation.

In weaving a new social fabric, each design thread is reflective of the specific and unique cultural strengths that immigrant communities bring to the City of Boston. This process represents the best of immigrant integration, an anti-assimilationist process in which community members and institutions learn from newcomers—and vice versa—creating new patterns that result in equity and well-being for all.

Read the full report at:

<https://immigranthealth.org/weaving-well-being>

