



A group from Gather Around visits an art gallery in Syracuse, NY | Source: InterFaith Works

# Gather Around

## A Guide for Organizations Serving Older English Language Learners

Community Need	2
Program Model	2
Program Development	3
Guiding Principles	3
Helpful and Promising Practices	4
Resources for More Information	7

## What is Gather Around?

Gather Around is an English class for older refugees. The program creates a safe, age-friendly environment for older refugees to learn English, so that they can do more of the things they need or want to, stay active, and age with dignity.

## Community Need

While older refugees often spend a lot of time socializing within their family and ethnic communities, it can be difficult to be independent in social and public spaces.

This is especially true for elders learning English as a new language; when they are uncertain about what native English-speakers are saying to them, they may fear for their safety and well-being.

As a result, older refugees may avoid greeting their neighbors, shopping for groceries, walking alone in local parks, or attending English classes.

All this can affect older refugees' mental and physical health. It also makes them more vulnerable to extreme isolation and decline should their social networks fail.

## Program Model

Gather Around is intended for older refugees with limited English. An "older refugee" is defined as any refugee resettled in the US who is experiencing a limitation or impairment that (a) is compounded by the aging process, and (b) makes participation in a traditional English class difficult. Older refugees may speak no English or may speak some English but lack the confidence to use their English to converse with strangers.

Gather Around meets twice weekly for twelve weeks; classes last for two hours. The class is led and supported by a combination of dedicated volunteers and paid staff. Curriculum is based on the "Bright Ideas" course developed by the Coalition for Limited English Speaking Elderly in Chicago ([www.clese.org](http://www.clese.org)). Gather Around tailors the Bright Ideas curriculum to best meet the needs of the senior participants, leaving room for creativity and the expert knowledge of the instructor.

**Gather Around uses everyday experiences to increase comfort and familiarity with the English language.**



## What is a refugee?

A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence.

A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.

Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.

*Source: UNHCR*

When participants are ready to graduate, they are introduced to other community English and literacy classes. Volunteers and staff take care to provide a soft hand-off, to assure that the elder feels comfortable and prepared to enter this new setting.

Owing to physical, cognitive, or mental health limitations, some participants may not graduate from the class; participants are invited to continue in Gather Around, so long as they attend regularly, make personal progress, and contribute positively to the group.

## Program Development

Gather Around was developed as part of Aging by Design, an initiative of the Health Foundation for Western and Central New York.

Aging by Design utilizes the process of Design Thinking, an approach to problem solving that puts the needs of people experiencing a problem at the core.

It provides a process for understanding people's needs and experiences, generating ideas to meet those needs, and then implementing innovative and practical solutions iteratively.

Developing programs that reach older adults, and particularly those living in poverty, can be challenging.

Aging by Design spurs creativity and innovation by supporting organizations who serve older adults in designing, testing and implementing new or re-imagined approaches to reducing falls, medication errors and lack of caregiver support.

(<https://hfwcnny.org/program/aging-by-design/>)



### What is Aging by Design?

Aging by Design aims to improve the lives of older adults and caregivers in Western and Central NYS.

Ten projects serving older adults were selected to receive grant funding over a two-year period.

Grantee projects embed human-centered design into their organization's work through continuous coaching, technical assistance, and shared learning between grantees.

## Guiding Principles

Older refugees have experienced violence, persecution, and dislocation; they have been separated from their families, their homes, and their traditions; their bodies have suffered violence and neglect. Many elders relive this mental, physical and spiritual trauma on a day-to-day basis – this can impact their health, their ability to sleep, and their capacity to cope with the transition to life in the US.

The impact of this trauma is quite present in the classroom: the old leg injury that limits classroom mobility, the untreated visual impairment that makes it difficult to see the board, the unaddressed insomnia that makes it difficult to stay awake or process and retain new learnings.

Gather Around uses the following framework to reduce barriers to learning and best engage and support older adults on their English-language journey:



**Age-Friendly:** As an age-friendly program, Gather Around supports and enables older refugees to “age actively” – that is, to live in security, enjoy good health and continue to participate fully in society ([www.who.int](http://www.who.int)).



**Trauma-Informed:** As a trauma-informed program, Gather Around strives to create physically, psychologically and emotionally safe space for trauma survivors, and encourages them to rebuild their sense of control and empowerment.



**Learner-Centered:** As a learner-centered program, Gather Around considers the full needs of the learner, and adapts curriculum and activities so that all participants can succeed.

## Helpful and Promising Practices

Starting an English class for Older Refugees can be as simple as recruiting a volunteer tutor and a handful of learners. Using the principles of Human-Centered Design, InterFaith Works learned how to better-engage older adults in English-language learning. Use these promising practices to create learning experiences in your community.

### Reduce barriers to participation

Even the most eager and interested elder will experience barriers to attending English class. One of the most challenging barriers is transportation; older refugees they may not drive and may not be able to depend on busy family members to bring them to class. They may feel uncomfortable using public transportation, or may not be able to walk even short distances. There are also emotional barriers to overcome - for older refugees with little or interrupted education, the formal classroom may be intimidating or stressful.

Help participants overcome these barriers:

- Offer transportation; this may include public transportation vouchers, rideshare services, or volunteer drivers
- Hold class in an easy-to-access location
- Use interpreters to keep everyone engaged and on task
- Incorporate art, music and movement into lessons to reduce stress and tap into alternative learning pathways





## Create an Age-Friendly Classroom

Traditional English classes are often overwhelming for older refugees, especially for those who have physical limitations related to vision, hearing or memory.

Simple adjustments to the classroom and the curriculum can help participants feel more welcome and engaged:

- Keep class sizes small - between 4 and 12 participants, depending on the skill of the instructor
- Offer frequent mental and physical breaks
- Lessons should be simple and focused on one or two concepts
- Focus on conversational English to accommodate all literacy levels
- Make time for repetition
- Use large fonts on PowerPoint slides, white boards, and hand-outs; black text on a white background is easiest to read
- Remind participants to bring glasses, hearing aids, and other adaptive equipment
- Use lightweight flexible seating and tables to help people maneuver spaces safely
- Adapt seating arrangements throughout the lesson
- Name tags help participants learn names and build confidence communicating with others

## Harness the Power of Volunteers

Volunteers and interns contribute to a successful class experience. They can help with transportation, lesson planning, and snack set up. Volunteers might lead instruction or work one-on-one with participants on targeted activities.

Remember that volunteers bring a diversity of skills, interests, and language abilities that can be leveraged for the benefit of the class. Take the time to provide volunteers with a brief orientation or training session, to help them understand their role and how they can help.



## Socialization and Community Education

For older refugees, the opportunity to gather together and spend time with peers is an important part of the learning process.

Make socialization and community education a regular piece of the curriculum:

- Create opportunities for socialization and culturally-appropriate hospitality, including healthy snacks and end-of-the session parties or graduation ceremonies
- When serving food, learn more about participants' favorite foods, dietary restrictions, and any physical limitations that might make certain foods difficult to chew or swallow
- Visit places in your community. Participants want to learn more about the history and cultural resources of their new community. These field trips can also reinforce curriculum and vocabulary
- Field trips might include visiting a local farm, an art museum, the zoo, the fair, local government offices, or a trip using public transit. Ask participants for their ideas, too!

## Resource and Referral

Older refugees may be experiencing unmet needs that will disrupt their ability to participate fully in class. Unmet needs may include vision, hearing, mental health, personal care, transportation and financial challenges.

Take steps to assess and meet these needs:

- Teach participants about life skills and personal safety, falls prevention, technology scams, and adapting to their new climate
- Learn about the free services offered through your local Area Agency on Aging and other Aging Services Providers
- Invite providers to speak to your group, and make referrals for services, as needed



## Resources for More Information

### Curriculum and Lessons



#### Bright Ideas

This curriculum helps low-literate elders learn English and civics. It was developed by the Coalition of Limited English Speaking Elderly, in Chicago, and was designed to meet the specific needs of community teachers with little experience in teaching students the literacy and communication skills needed for self-sufficiency, citizenship, and civic engagement. <http://clese.org/elder-programs/bright-ideas>

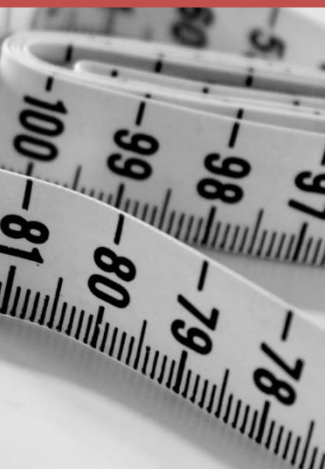
#### ProLiteracy

ProLiteracy promotes adult literacy through content development, programs, and advocacy. Among other things, they offer a catalogue of skill-building texts for learners, and professional development opportunities for tutors. [www.proliteracy.org](http://www.proliteracy.org)

#### New Readers Press

New Readers Press, the publishing division of ProLiteracy, provides instructional tools to teach adult students the skills they need to thrive. Publications include reading instruction, high school equivalency, workplace skills development, and more. [www.newreaderspress.com](http://www.newreaderspress.com)

### Assessment



#### Participant Feedback Survey

This tool can be used at the middle and end of the course, to measure the impact that English lessons are having on the social and emotional well-being of participants. Click here: <https://tinyurl.com/uhtgcwm>

#### Benchmark Oral Assessment Tool

This tool was developed to track participant learning progress throughout the course and should be filled out by the instructor at approximately 2-week intervals. The assessment is based on the instructor's observations of student learning and was designed to be used by volunteers with little teaching experience. Click here: <https://tinyurl.com/vdyqyca>

### Other Resources



#### The Goals of Universal Design

Learn how to build physical, learning and work environments so that they are usable by a wide range of people, regardless of age, size or disability status. <http://www.buffalo.edu/access/help-and-support/topic3.html>

#### Volunteer Match

This website allows you to post volunteer needs and connect with passionate volunteers in your community. Free and membership options available. [www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org)



## InterFaith Works of Central New York, Inc.

InterFaith Works of Central New York, through education, service and dialogue, affirms the dignity of each person and every faith community and works to create relationships and understanding among us.



InterFaith Works builds bridges of understanding to affirm the dignity of all people in Central New York. Working with the different faith communities and the diversity of the region's people, we address deeply embedded social divisions. Informed and influenced by the values and ethics of the faith traditions, we work with the community to find common ground on its issues. Using the tools of interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue, we create life-changing experiences that lead to actions for the creation of a more equitable and loving community.

## Health Foundation for Western and Central New York

Based in Buffalo, NY with a second office in Syracuse, NY, the Health Foundation for Western and Central New York is an independent private foundation that serves 16 counties, including Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie, Genesee, Niagara, Orleans and Wyoming counties in western New York, as well as Cayuga, Cortland, Herkimer, Madison, Oneida, Onondaga, Oswego and Tompkins counties in central New York.



Our vision is that older adults lead a dignified, independent, high quality life in their community; all young children impacted by poverty are physically, socially and emotionally healthy as they enter kindergarten; and our communities are able to plan for and meet the health needs of the most vulnerable. To achieve outcomes that last, we work together with our community partners to develop, implement and evaluate sustainable programs that make a positive difference in the lives of thousands of young children and older adults in our regions

### Prepared by:

Senior Services Department  
InterFaith Works of Central New York, Inc.  
315-449-3552  
[info@interfaithworkscny.org](mailto:info@interfaithworkscny.org)

