Bravely fighting COVID-19 and protecting the community
Surviving Bhutan’s ethnic cleansing and two decades in refugee camps... now building hopeful future in Ohio
Delivering essential services every day to the most vulnerable

PLUS:
THE STORY OF THE BHUTANESE REFUGEE JOURNEY TO AMERICA
As a 501c3 refugee-led community organization, the BCCO supports newly arriving refugees, but it also plays a singular role in providing services to the much larger secondary migration population in Ohio. In a 2017 analysis, The Ohio State University estimated that there were 23,437 Bhutanese refugees in Central Ohio, and that number now nears 27,000. This is the largest Bhutanese population concentrated outside of Bhutan.

To the Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio:

Ohio is home to the largest Bhutanese-Nepali population anywhere outside of Bhutan, and we are pleased that so many have decided to make Ohio home.

Our state is blessed to be home to people from numerous cultures, races, and ethnicities. It’s part of what makes Ohio such a special place to live.

Thank you for the valuable contributions you and members of your community make to Ohio to enrich our state.

Very respectfully yours,

Mike DeWine
Governor
Research reveals that the pandemic has hit communities of color with greater force than any other community. The health disparities around prevention, treatment and quality of life now grow deeper. Perhaps no community has been affected more than our refugee and immigrant communities, which must often overcome steep barriers of access and participation even in the best of times...barriers which may now seem unscalable.

Despite the devastation and also the added burden of Asian-American hate we have experienced here and around the U.S., I see many reasons for hope. As a former refugee and now as a proud Bhutanese-American citizen, I’m hopeful because of the many examples of individuals, organizations, funders, and city, county, state and federal governments who have stepped up with support during our darkest days. I’m hopeful because of the great resilient spirit, shared sacrifice and support I have seen firsthand within our refugee communities and the organizations which serve them.

I’m also hopeful because of the Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio. As a refugee-led ethnic-based organization, we have had to persevere in the face of ethnic cleansing, being forcibly removed from our homes, stripped of rights and possessions, and pushed to the brink of losing hope.

But we did not lose hope. Not then. Not today. The BCCO sprang into action in March 2020 and created a network of volunteers and a national model for COVID-19 response for refugee communities called BRAVE. Our small talented team worked around the clock to ensure the refugee community had quality culturally appropriate health information about prevention and the virus, access to testing and PPE, emergency economic and mental health support through our caseworkers. All of this while continuing to provide many vital direct services every day — in person or virtually — to our client families, as part of essential programs generously supported by the HHS Office of Refugee Resettlement, the Franklin County Board of Commissioners, the City of Columbus, the Columbus Foundation, United Way of Central Ohio and others.

Collectively, with all of us leaning on and learning from each other, we will continue to heal and grow.

And we will always have hope.

Jhumanath Acharya, MSc (Nepal), MSW (Ohio State ’23)
Chairperson, Board of Directors
Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio
Born in Bhutan and lived 19 years in the refugee camp
Moved to Columbus from Rhode Island with his family in 2012

I am grateful to Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio for their partnership and efforts to meet the needs of our Bhutanese residents. Columbus is proud to be a welcoming city but we must also be a city where every family can succeed and thrive.

To do this we need to provide culturally informed outreach to engage with families to understand and support their needs.

We could not do that without the vital work of community partners like BCCO.

— Elizabeth Brown, President Pro Tempore, Columbus City Council
2020 in Review
Facing a lethal pandemic and heavy burdens on the refugee and immigrant community it serves, the BCCO steps up to lead the fight and save lives.

The Refugee Journey
Bhutan’s brutal ethnic cleansing campaign killed thousands, but the Bhutanese-Nepali community’s resilient spirit lives on as they build a hopeful future in Columbus.

Community Impact
Bhutanese Americans create new businesses, provide critical health care, lead non-profits, serve as elected officials, and make Central Ohio better.

Financial Snapshot
The BCCO rapidly expanded services to battle COVID-19 fallout. Public and private support helped ensure BCCO remained fiscally sound.

With Gratitude
With deep thanks (danyavad!) to our funders, donors and partners, the BCCO works tirelessly to improve the quality of life for thousands.
2020 IN Review

It has been said that the true colors and character of an individual, organization or country surfaces during times of great crisis.

In 2020, in the face of a deadly and heartbreaking pandemic, the Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio stepped up and proved its mettle, rallying its community networks, organizing a historic COVID-19 response, and protecting and saving many lives.

Being a refugee-led community non-profit organization means the BCCO’s staff and board – and the broader refugee community it serves – consist mainly of people who have faced great personal trauma, displacement and loss throughout their lives. Bhutanese refugees in America do not shrink from a crisis. Rather, they pull together, give freely of themselves, creatively find solutions, and work tirelessly without question to benefit the common good, particularly those most at risk.

The BCCO served more than 7,000 individuals in 2020 through its HHS Office of Refugee Resettlement program, its Franklin County Commissioners-supported Catalyst initiative, COVID-19 BRAVE network’s education, communications, material support and testing/vaccination work, Mental Health First Aid Trainings, civic engagement, graduation recognition, and other important outreach and empowerment efforts.

With the BCCO’s help, an elderly Bhutanese American woman receives her COVID-19 vaccine.

The BCCO team, March 2021, from left: Mani Biswa, Priya Sharma, Sudarshan Pyakurel, Shrijana Adhikari, and Soma Thapa.
And these values put into action continue to help the Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio have an oversized positive impact on the refugee and broader Central Ohio communities.

Given its trusted role in serving this growing population, the BCCO had to respond quickly and address the immediate health, social and economic emergency of COVID-19 as it began to roar through our communities. In March 2020, we led a major effort to create the Bhutanese Response Assistance Volunteer Effort (BRAVE) — a network of 250+ volunteers including 58 nurses, two primary care doctors and seven IT developers — coordinated by our BCCO team. The BCCO and BRAVE joined hands with Bhutanese American communities and organizations in 12 cities across seven states. A Bhutanese American-based software startup company in Cleveland, NEBHAM LLC, developed the BRAVE mobile application to route community needs and requests to the appropriate volunteers.

BRAVE has been the go-to resource for families in need of culturally appropriate, accurate health information, COVID-19 screenings, testing and vaccinations, PPE, food, medicine, and stabilizing economic support in Central Ohio.

“The BCCO means home to me. I feel like I exist here in Columbus because of the BCCO. It’s close to everyone’s heart. A lot of people are moving to Columbus because of that sense of community and how BCCO connects us all. When COVID hit, we needed help and support. When the BCCO created the BRAVE program, it was right on time. BRAVE gave the community hope and confidence. COVID would have hit us harder if not for the BCCO and BRAVE.”

— Uma Acharya

Born in refugee camp
Moved to Columbus from Arizona with her family in 2013
Working on second degree from Ohio State
Co-founder of Women of Knowledge & Education (WOKE)
Member, BCCO Board of Directors
The BCCO’s BRAVE COVID-19 response is making a difference, serving hundreds of families in Franklin County, and many more in Ohio and beyond. The BRAVE model and existing network can be deployed for future needs requiring a coordinated rapid response.

In addition to BRAVE and our ongoing COVID-19 response, the BCCO continues to deliver daily a full range of essential direct services, education and resilience programs to individuals and families through our HHS Office of Refugee Resettlement-funded case management and organization-building RISE program, and our Catalyst programs which are generously funded by a grant from the Franklin County Board of Commissioners. Mental Health First Aid trainings and parent-student empowerment services such as online learning support and technology access help are cornerstones of the ongoing Catalyst efforts.

Compounding the many burdens levied by the COVID-19 pandemic on refugee and immigrant communities has been a rise in violence in lower-income neighborhoods in cities across the United States, including Columbus in 2020 and 2021. Sadly, some of this increase in violence includes verbal and physical attacks toward Asian-Americans.
The Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio responded to this additional crisis in early 2021, after violence against Bhutanese community members and other communities of color were reported in the neighborhoods around BCCO’s center. The BCCO called on the City of Columbus, apartment complex property owners, and other entities to take immediate action to address safety concerns and substandard housing, and hold responsible parties accountable.

We also worked to educate the community about its rights, resources and responsibilities. Caseworkers from BCCO went door to door in the neighborhood, conducting wellness checks and providing packets with resources to community members. We also continue to partner with the media to raise awareness of these issues and to advocate for change.

Thanks to the BCCO, the City has now begun to step up code enforcement of the substandard apartments, and some of the physical safety issues are beginning to be worked on.

Sudarshan Pyakurel, BCCO executive director, and the BCCO team have convened three virtual community forums with Bhutanese and broader community members. These have served to both build solidarity and to produce ways to work together to address problems.

The BCCO will continue to help lead the quest for real change on this systemic issue and create healthier, safer neighborhoods where all families can feel safe and thrive.
The BCCO was the only resource that we found in the middle of the pandemic when we moved to Columbus from another state. I am very thankful to the BCCO and the staff who not only helped me to apply for the benefits but also helped to enroll and assist in the virtual learning for my children in the Columbus public schools district. BCCO is very important to us because it was the only office open when all others were closed because of the pandemic, and we were not able to do anything through phone or online because of language issues.

— Meena Pithakotey, enrolled with her family in BCCO’s Catalyst program

I was 9 years old when we were forced from our home and had to leave Bhutan. In the refugee camp, my mom and dad said, ‘we lost everything and we will never go back there. We don’t have our identity, we don’t have possessions, we don’t have anything.’ But they told us ‘we still have our hope. Do not lose your hope.’ It was with that hope - and $20 in our pocket - that we came to the U.S.

— Mani Biswa, BCCO Caseworker and Catalyst Program Outreach Coordinator

Moved to Columbus from Massachusetts with his family in 2019
Voices

Sarita Darjee. “I am so thankful to the staff at BCCO. We don’t have any family members in Columbus, so I could not rely on anyone. I was afraid that they were too afraid to come near us and help us. That’s when I called Priya at BCCO. I needed PPEs and medication from my pharmacy. I remember it was snowing really heavy that day and you guys still came to drop it off. I am always going to be thankful for that day. That medication was really important to me.”

Chali and Kamal Darjee. “I don’t think our relationship with the BCCO will ever be over because every day there is a new need or questions. I would always want to come here to know of any updates in the office or outside in the community. I feel we will always be working together. I may need help in the future and in the future, if I can be of any help to this community center, I would not hesitate to help.” — Kamal Darjee.

Salah. “I felt welcomed when I first came in to BCCO and no one was mean to me. They helped me with my rent when I almost got evicted. Before COVID-19, I had worked for 18 years and I’ve never asked for help from anyone. I have taken care of myself but now I am struggling to pay rent.”

Salah is a Syrian refugee and small business owner who has been receiving services from BCCO since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. She initially came to BCCO to look for financial help as she became unemployed due to COVID-19, and was facing eviction. BCCO was able to provide one-time rent assistance to give her economic stability and connect her to other resources.

Pabitra Khadka. “I went everywhere, and I still couldn’t fix my immigration issue. I really felt like I didn’t have anyone to go to. That’s why I came to the BCCO.”

Pabitra began receiving services from the BCCO in late 2019, getting connected through friends and relatives. Due to issues with her immigration status, Pabitra could not acquire a driver’s license, find employment, or enroll in a GED program. With BCCO caseworkers’ help, Pabitra now has her Green Card, driver’s license, and has continued her employment. Pabitra also joined the Women of Knowledge and Education group which supports the advancement of young Bhutanese women. She now receives tutoring help from WOKE members as she prepares to take her GED exams.
I love Columbus and the BCCO. There’s such a large Bhutanese-Nepali population here. I feel we’re more connected now and not separated like we were in Nepal. Columbus has so many things to offer... a lot of opportunities and jobs, excellent health care and schools, and so many diverse cultures and people. It gives us confidence that all people can be part of this community. Many people are moving here because of the BCCO too. They were living in cities with no Bhutanese-Nepali organization like the BCCO. At the end of the day, they know it’s the one place that can help them.

— Priya Sharma

Born in Nepal, Priya and her family were one of the first Bhutanese-Nepali refugees to resettle in Columbus in 2009. Graduate of Ohio State University. Co-founder of Women of Knowledge & Education (WOKE) BCCO caseworker, 2019-2021

Nanda Lal Sharma and grandson. “This office is open all the time for everyone. Make your appointment, come here, and all the brothers and sisters here will help you.”

Sharma first connected to BCCO a year ago when he had lost his Green Card, Social Security card, and other important legal documents which are essential to have as an immigrant. With the help of BCCO Case Manager Soma Thapa, Nanda Lal was able to re-apply for and replace all of his lost documents. He continues to stay connected with BCCO and often volunteers his time to help with different events.
Dilli Ram Dhimal describes the day in June 1992, Tshring Togbe, the Bhutan district magistrate, arrived in Lalai accompanied by Bhutanese soldiers. Togbe called the (Nepali-Bhutanese) villagers to assemble and then announced over a loudspeaker that they had seven days to pack up their belongings and leave the country. When a few of the peasants protested, a Bhutan army officer shouted:

“This is a hunting ground, and we can take you like monkeys.” — The Nation, March 7, 2012

All ruthless authoritarian regimes which systematically targeted ethnic, racial and religious groups with the intent to forcibly remove – and even destroy – the population.

Tragically, all involved an intentional policy “to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group.” and rise to the level of ethnic cleansing and genocide atrocities, as defined in Article II of the United Nations 1948 Genocide Convention and in the 1992 UN declaration that ethnic cleansing is a form of genocide.

In the case of Bhutan, in the 1980s, Wangchuck wanted to rid his country of the Lhotshampa, the ethnic Nepali Bhutanese citizens living in the south, so he could “purify” Bhutan into one Buddhist-only nation, religion, language and culture. He feared the growing population of Nepali Bhutanese citizens, who were predominantly Hindu and who peacefully farmed and owned small tracts of land in the south that their forefathers had cleared from jungle more than 100 years before. He also coveted their land.
Like all dictators bent on increasing power through the terror of ethnic cleansing, Wangchuck followed a well-worn bloody playbook.

In 1985, he enacted a Citizenship Act dubbed “One Nation. One People.” which directly targeted the Nepali Bhutanese population’s religion, culture, dress, language, schools, land, livelihoods, and even the length of women’s hair. He prohibited the practice and teaching of the Hindu religion, speaking the Nepali language and the teaching of the Nepali language in Nepali-Bhutanese schools. Wangchuck decreed that any criticism of the king would mean imprisonment.

In 1988, with the intention of stripping away citizenship and eliminating large numbers of Nepali Bhutanese, Wangchuck ordered a census but only in the southern region where the Nepali Bhutanese live. Residents were classified into seven categories ostensibly to determine their Bhutanese “purity level.” Wangchuck demanded that residents produce a land tax receipt specifically from the year 1958 or be designated an “illegal immigrant” to be deported, even though they were citizens and often had family heritage going back a century or two. Bhutan designated tens of thousands of Nepali Bhutanese citizens as “non-nationals” and “illegal immigrants,” and moved to begin their forcible deportation.

With their land, homes, culture, religion, education, jobs, citizenship, and rights being stripped away, some Bhutanese Nepali citizens held peaceful demonstrations in southern Bhutan in 1990. Wangchuck ordered his army to violently crack down on protesters, harass families and terrorize Bhutanese Nepali villages.

Thousands of men arrested arbitrarily, tortured and held in prison. Some die. Women raped by soldiers. Homes burned. Schools and medical services shut down.

The King’s army went door to door, confiscating and destroying citizenship cards. They gave families as little as 24 hours to leave Bhutan. They forced individuals, under duress, to sign “Voluntary Migration Forms” to
show the world they were “gladly” leaving the country of their own will.

In August of 1990, the first Nepali Bhutanese began to flee Bhutan.

**They built Bhutan. Their farms fed Bhutan. Then Bhutan violently purged them.**

The first known migration of families from Nepal to Bhutan took place in 1624. Bhutan’s spiritual ruler, the Lama Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, signed a formal document with Nepal’s King Ram Shah to recruit 50 families of skilled Nepali artisans to design and construct Buddhist Dzongs (fortified buildings housing Buddhist schools) and monasteries in Bhutan. They all received Bhutan citizenship.

In 1890, Bhutan invited Nepali citizens to immigrate to Bhutan to clear the dense jungles in the south, establish fertile terraced soil and farm the lands. These lands later would provide the majority of Bhutan’s food supply. The next 40 years featured the largest migration of ethnic Nepalis to Bhutan ever.

The first Nationality Law of Bhutan was enacted in 1958. In it, Bhutan’s King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck formally granted Bhutanese citizenship to Nepali Bhutanese “permanently domiciled” (living) in Bhutan, as well as their direct descendants. From the mid-1950s, ethnic Nepali Bhutanese began to be admitted into civil service, the army and the police, and were made members of the Monarchy’s cabinet and judiciary.

But in 1977, in the first of many cascading policies aimed at discriminating against the Nepali Bhutanese and limiting their ability to become citizens or hold basic human rights, the ruling Drukpa elite and King Jigme Singye Wangchuck created a new Citizenship Act. The Drukpa monarchy ignored history and began to assert that the ethnic Nepali Bhutanese were indeed not citizens, rather “illegal immigrants” who now threatened Bhutan.

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**“Every day, beating us with sticks. My body felt like it was dying.”**

During the late 1980s, Tika Acharya worked diligently, driving a truck and selling oranges and cardamom to markets in Bhutan, India and Nepal. He grew up a son of Bhutan, with his father born there in 1940. He and his wife, Kamala, owned a house and a bit of land in the rural Dagana district in southwestern Bhutan.

But under King Wangchuck’s 1985 “One Nation. One People.” ethnic cleansing policy, Acharya saw his serene community’s culture, religion, language, possessions and hope evaporating quickly. The Bhutan monarchy’s oppressive actions grew more intimidating and violent every day.
“Some Nepali Bhutanese started protesting that there were no freedoms, no rights in Bhutan. They wanted democracy,” says Acharya, who now lives with his wife in the Columbus suburb of Reynoldsburg. “They stole our lands and homes, and forced us to adopt the Drukpa (Buddhist) culture and religion and go against the teachings of our sacred religion.”

Anticipating — and even wanting — the protests, Bhutan’s army responded with brutal force. Not only on the protesters, but on anyone living in their villages.

“Late one night, 10 army soldiers came to our house and accused me of giving a donation to support the protesters, which wasn’t true,” says Acharya. “They put me in jail with 40 people in one room and no toilet.”

“One of the men in the jail asked for some water. The jailers put their urine in the prisoner’s mouth instead,” says Acharya. “They blindfolded us. There were so many men that they ran out of handcuffs, so they used coarse rope instead which cut off circulation. I saw one man die from that. They tortured and killed two of my friends.”

The arbitrary arrests and torture — classic trademarks of ethnic cleansing tactics — of Nepali Bhutanese men continued to spread across southern Bhutan. With Kamala now pregnant with their first child, Acharya lived in fear of the next attack on his village, where men would be picked up as they walked down the road and not seen for weeks or months. The king’s soldiers arrested him on three separate occasions, holding him without cause for 14 days, one month, and three days.

Finally, the 27-year-old Acharya reached his breaking point.

“Every day, beating us with sticks. My body felt like it was dying. It was too much. I decided to leave.”

Of course, leaving — and therefore, destroying — this ethnic and religious minority population was Bhutan’s goal all along.

“They told me every day, “You can leave this jail and end the beatings if you just agree to leave the country,”” says Acharya. “They then forced me to sign a Voluntary Migration Form saying that I was choosing to leave.”
As one last dehumanizing condition, the jailers ordered him to smile and “show your teeth” so his photo on the form would depict him as happy.

Given three weeks to leave his community, house, land and possessions behind, Acharya set free his beloved cows and goats, and bid his final goodbyes. He and Kamala, with their 9-month-old daughter Purna in tow, gathered what they could carry and, along with his younger brother, mother, father, and 86-year-old grandmother, set off on foot toward the border of India.

It took them three days walking and following the river which supplied them water, while taking turns carrying his elderly grandmother in a large basket on their backs, to reach the border. They then slept outside for two days, and planned the next leg of their journey . . . getting to a makeshift refugee camp they had heard about on the banks of the holy Kankai Mai River in Nepal.

They called it Maidhar.
The most vulnerable 91, lethal outbreaks, and acts of courage

By early 1991, the exodus of Nepali Bhutanese into India’s West Bengal state numbered a few hundred. Knowing many more refugees would soon follow, refugee leaders approached Indian government officials with a request to set up a camp. India refused.

Coldly received by India and with no options before them, the leaders identified the most endangered men and women among the refugees. This group of 91 contained frail elderly, men with fresh wounds all over their bodies from repeated torture, and women who had been raped by Bhutan’s soldiers.

They decided that “if they were going to die, let them die on the soil of Nepal,” recounts Ram Karki.

Having survived torture while in high school, the then 19-year-old Karki was studying to be a teacher in Bhutan when he saw Bhutan police coming to arrest him for possessing pro-democracy pamphlets. Knowing he would be put in jail and beat again, Karki jumped out of his window and escaped Bhutan to India on August 19, 1990.

In February 1991, refugee leaders asked him and two others to take the 91 vulnerable Bhutanese refugees from India and find a space for them in Nepal. They rented a mini-bus and used every inch to fit everyone. Five hours later, the three guides and the 91 reached the Nepal border. Karki went 35 miles into Nepal looking for unclaimed land. On the banks of the Kankai Mai River in Jhapa district, he found an empty gaushala (cow shed) where they kept sacred cows.

He purchased the shed for 300 rupees (52 USD), travelled back to the border and helped bring the 91 men and women to the cow shed on the banks of the river. From that day on, it became known as the Mai (mother) dhar (bank) camp.

“We only had that empty cow shed, with cow dung on the floor,” says Karki. “At night, we would lay head to head — a tight space. Some would be crying. Others laughing, telling stories. We would go into the nearby village during the day, looking for food. Some people donated corn and some rice.”

“Those first days, we struggled to establish the camp,” says Karki, who now lives in The Hague, Netherlands. “The people from the village wanted us to dismantle the camp and come to the village to live. We said no, we would stay together in community at Maidhar. It was do or die. Had we left, Maidhar would never have been.”

Word of this Maidhar camp spread to the other Bhutanese refugees in India and to thousands of Nepali Bhutanese families facing violence and...
More than 20 percent of Bhutan’s 600,000 population became refugees when Bhutan’s King Wangchuck systematically purged the ethnic Nepali Bhutanese population from the country in the 1990s. By 2007, more than 108,000 Nepali Bhutanese refugees lived in the seven UN camps, and an estimated 15,000-25,000 more lived without refugee protection status in India and Nepal. This makes Bhutan one of the greatest producers of refugees per capita of any country in the world.

persecution across Bhutan. Within a few weeks, trucks carrying refugees began arriving, pushing the population to several thousand by summer and expanding every day.

But with little resources or capability to manage the burgeoning refugee numbers — and with poor sanitation, contaminated water supplies, food shortages and no health care — conditions grew grim. Outbreaks of cholera, dysentery, typhoid, and malaria overwhelmed the community. The death toll kept rising.

“I was in charge of arranging to burn the bodies of those who had died, as is the Hindu funeral ritual,” says Karki. “I would leave to go collect firewood for the cremation, come back and there would be another body. There were 20 deaths a day or more. I tried to carry a small boy to the health clinic and he died on the way.”

Tragedy, Maidhar unity and the two Purnas

Tika and Kamala Acharya, their 9-month-old daughter Purna, his grandmother Purna, brother, mother and father travelled in a truck on bumpy Indian roads with five other families huddled together and arrived at Maidhar camp on November 26, 1991. They bought a plastic tent, and he went to work gathering small sticks in the jungle to use for the walls. The UN had started providing basic rations of food, but not shelter.

“When we arrived at Maidhar, there were several thousand refugees and it was somewhat manageable,” says Acharya. “But by January 1992, there were 20-25 trucks coming...
every day, and the population grew to 50,000-60,000 people by March. There was no room, few toilets, very congested. We were right on top of each other. The dust and wind affected breathing and our roof would blow off during storms. It was so crowded that people had to create an overflow camp in Tamai, Nepal.”

Tika’s grandmother, Purna, lived two months at Maidhar before she passed away. Years before, she loved celebrating the Hindu festivals with family in Bhutan and she and Kamala were able to enjoy a final one together that December at Maidhar.

That same month, the infant Purna became sick with dysentery, blood in her stool, diarrhea, breathing difficulties and fever, and grew thin. Her condition worsened. Fearing that he may lose his daughter to the diseases which had befallen so many children at Maidhar, Tika took action.

“We had 35 kids die in one day at Maidhar,” says Acharya. “There was no doctor there — we had camp volunteers who gave out Tylenol at the health clinic and you had to wait all day. I had heard that the Nepali Bhutanese doctor, Dr. Bhampa Rai, who had been the personal physician to Bhutan’s King Wangchuck at one time, was helping a lot of people at a private clinic 30 minutes away by bus. Dr. Rai had to flee Bhutan as well, and became a refugee in Nepal.”

“So I carried little Purna and we went to see him. I waited four hours, and he didn’t charge us a fee,” says Acharya. “He prescribed an antibiotic to treat her pneumonia. It saved Purna’s life.”

From 1998-2008, Bhutanese young people in the UN refugee camps told their stories through photography, as part of The Children’s Forum and Photovoice project. The photos reflect community, compassion, joy and despair of life in the camps. The photographer-storytellers wrote the accompanying captions.

The Health Centre in the refugee camp can give only primary care and for the secondary treatment for her baby she has to get a referral health card so she can get to good health facilities out of the camps. These days we are not getting proper health facilities because many mothers lose their babies in childhood. So not only refugee children are dying because of lack of health facilities but also adults are dying due to poor health facilities. This is why I wanted to snap this photo.

Til Maya/Children’s Forum/Photovoice

There is a saying that thousands of ants can kill an elephant like that we can also solve our problems by sharing our ideas and discussing our struggles together.

Aite Maya/Children’s Forum/Photovoice
Through all of the heartbreak, loss of life and turmoil, Tika believes that the Maidhar camp brought out the true spirit of the Nepali Bhutanese community.

“We had unity at Maidhar,” says Acharya, who was a community leader at the camp. “Each one helped the other out. Everyone wanted to help, whatever the need.”

Kamala, who would give birth to two more daughters while in the UN camp, expresses gratitude for those days, as well. “I’m grateful to the Kankai Mai River, and I’m grateful to Nepal. They never forced us to leave.”

The Maidhar camp carries great significance in the Bhutanese refugee journey story. Because of the tens of thousands of refugees who came there for survival, the disease outbreaks and the tragic death toll, addressing the magnitude of the Bhutanese refugee humanitarian disaster became a priority for the UN’s refugee agency UNHCR and for the government of Nepal.

In summer of 1992, the UNHCR and Nepal agreed to step up and establish seven UN refugee camps in the region to house the expanding Bhutanese refugee community. And that, in turn, finally led to the resettlement of more than 110,000 Bhutanese refugees starting in 2008.
UN camps and the long road to recovery

After Bhutan’s ethnic cleansing campaign, the great forced displacement of 20 percent of Bhutan’s population, deplorable conditions in overwhelmed Maidhar and thousands of deaths, the UNHCR’s newly established camps in Nepal housed what would become 120,000 refugees. The camps provided stability and safety, a relatively adequate food supply, schools, basic health care services, and freedom to practice their religion and celebrate their cultural traditions.

For the first few years, many Bhutanese refugees felt they would be allowed to return to their homes in Bhutan, as is their right under international law. But to this day, Bhutan has not allowed one refugee to repatriate. Bhutan slow-walked talks with Nepal and the UNHCR, nor would Nepal allow the refugees to become citizens in their ethnic ancestral homeland.

Word of possible resettlement to other countries — known as the third option — began percolating, but progress came slowly. Months turned to years, and years to decades. The psychological burden of so much time spent in the camp, waiting in limbo as a stateless people, began to weigh on its residents.

Some mothers in the UN camps experienced depression because, as refugees, they were not permitted to work outside the camp and earn a living to supplement the basic food rations and improve nutrition, blaming themselves for their children’s uncertain future, and any breakdown in the family. For awhile, because of the UN’s substandard nutrition, there were outbreaks of beriberi caused by thiamine (vitamin B1) deficiencies, and even scurvy, caused by vitamin C deficiency.

Some older Bhutanese refugees feared the difficulties of possibly having to learn a new language, culture, and country if resettled to another nation. Young Bhutanese refugees worked hard at their studies in the camps’ schools, only to feel chagrined about their precarious future.

As a young, earnest student in the Beldangi I camp’s school, Mani Biswa, BCCO case manager, felt that despair.

“One day I came home from school and said to my parents, what’s the use of going to school if we don’t have a future? My mom and dad said to me, ‘We don’t have our identity, we don’t have possessions, we don’t have anything. But we still have our hope. Don’t lose your hope. Keep going to school. Do what your teachers say to do,’” says Biswa, who now lives in the Columbus suburb of Gahanna with his wife and four children, and quite near those hopeful parents who reside five minutes away in Westerville.

What happened in Bhutan and over the past 30+ years can be seen as a triple tragedy. The horror of the planned ethnic cleansing of the Nepali Bhutanese...
people and the subsequent thousands of people who perished. Then world powers stood idly by or in India’s case, acquiesced, as the atrocities raged on, perhaps their attention diverted by other global events. Either way, no one stepped in to protect the Nepali Bhutanese and to punish Bhutan. Finally, the tragedy of Bhutan’s three decades of whitewashing of this history, its propaganda machine churning out lies about the genocide, and the lack of accountability to this day.

And every year, the Bhutanese refugee communities around the world must read and hear about Bhutan’s apocryphal “Gross National Happiness” index, an artificial “survey” conducted by the Monarchy of its residents. In fact, in the independent World Happiness Report conducted by Columbia University experts and the Gallup World Poll each year, based on multiple objective economic, social, psychological and other life metrics, Bhutan does not even make the list of the top 149 countries in the world ranked by the happiness of their citizens.

**Coming to America**

In October 2006, the hopeful news spread through the seven camps: the United States offered to resettle 60,000 Bhutanese refugees. Soon, several other countries followed suit. On February 28, 2008, the first Bhutanese refugee, Pingala Dhital, and her family arrived in Seattle. Four months later, the first Bhutanese refugee families landed at John Glenn International Airport in Columbus.

Aspirations took root as the Bhutanese refugees began their resettlement around the world, with the vast majority coming to America. Yet the joy remains tempered as survivors start new lives while still burdened by past anguish.

They may carry their physical and mental wounds forever. Some repress memories, others find remembering stories of torture, what they experienced at Maidhar or the other camps, or the loss of life too traumatic. Openly sharing the suffering is the best way for others to move forward. Working through the hardships and the normal stressors of resettlement life can feel like an elephant on the backs of former refugees.

The psychological burdens can carry over into resettlement, as evidenced by a Bhutanese refugee suicide rate that research studies put at twice the national average. Mental health issues cross all ages. Young Bhutanese Americans may struggle with living between two cultures and substance abuse, while older Bhutanese Americans may feel more closed off from society because of language and other barriers.
Columbus is a growing community saturated in diversity and culture. As we continue to welcome new residents to our city and assure the success of current residents, we need community partners such as the BCCO to help us reach every person in need. BCCO has been an outstanding partner and we are so very proud of our relationship.

— Emmanuel V. Remy
Councilmember. City of Columbus

“There’s a great need in the community to address mental health issues,” says Uma Acharya, BCCO board member. “And for young women, they have different expectations than their parents, and deal with different issues like drugs, pregnancies, and depression. We saw a need to create a safe place and support group for them. That’s why we started WOKE (Women of Knowledge and Education),” she says.

This is precisely why the first Bhutanese refugee families in Columbus formed the Bhutanese-Nepali Community of Columbus (BNCC) civic organization in 2009. In March of 2012, BNCC received its 501(c)3 IRS designation and became the Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio in 2017.

Mental health resilience training, parental and student empowerment programs, broad case management services, job assistance, advocacy and providing a safe and welcoming sense of community at BCCO continue to be at the heart of the organization’s mission, and always will be.

Also helping to strengthen the Bhutanese community is living in a democracy, becoming U.S. citizens and having constitutionally protected human rights for the first time. BCCO provides multiple civic and community engagement activities for Bhutanese Americans.

Being welcomed in a growing city of opportunity like Columbus means a great deal as well, and it is one of the main reasons Columbus has become the global center of the Bhutanese diaspora.

“The BCCO is not just a non-profit organization, it’s a community center,” says Priya Sharma. “It started as a community center and it’s still a community center. It’s one of the reasons BCCO is so trusted here. The BCCO also advocates for and represents the whole Bhutanese-Nepali community and that makes a lot of things accessible to the Bhutanese-Nepali community in Columbus and Ohio.”

“The Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio helps you transform your life without having to transform who you really are,” Sharma says. “You can stay connected to your culture and still be a part of the mainstream community. And at the moment when you know you’re struggling and when you don’t have anyone else to turn to and there’s someone showing you the right direction, that’s everything at that moment. And BCCO does that.”

Uma Acharya, one of the three daughters of Tika and Kamala Acharya, grew up in the UN camp with sisters Purna and Tara. They now all live within five minutes of each other in two Columbus suburbs, successful young women with promising futures, a deep connection to family and community, and gratitude to have found their way home together to Columbus and the BCCO.

“For tons of people, Columbus and the BCCO are the connection to home,” says Uma Acharya. “There’s a real sense of community. You feel like you belong here, have a place here. The BCCO provides services and hope, and represents our community in the city, county and state . . . they see us because of the BCCO.”

“No other place can replace the BCCO.”

We’ve been through a great transformation of the BCCO in the last five years, but many challenges remain ahead of us. We continue our work in building the organization to improve the quality of life for those who we serve. I see a bright future for the Bhutanese American community and for all refugees and immigrants in Central Ohio.

— Sudarshan Pyakurel
Born in Bhutan, grew up in UN refugee camp
Working on second degree from Ohio State University
Executive Director, Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio
From Maidhar to Main Street
*Born into a time of sorrow, now a leader improving lives in Ohio*

Surya Dulal and his family fled Bhutan when he was just one year old. They made the difficult journey to Nepal in 1991 and survived the harsh conditions of the Maidhar camp on the Kankai Mai River. They then lived in the U.N. refugee camp for 18 years before resettling in their new home of Columbus in 2009.

Seeing a great need for a small retail pharmacy with patient-centered, culturally appropriate care, Dulal and a co-owner opened the Lifeline Pharmacy in Reynoldsburg, Ohio, in August 2020 in the middle of the pandemic. A respiratory therapist and pharmacy technician, Dulal has treated COVID-19 patients who were on respirators at Grant Medical Center in Columbus. Lifeline, an independent community pharmacy, now has more than 500 active patients and growing and has provided COVID-19 vaccinations to more than 2,500 people.

The BCCO knows this growing refugee community better than any organization. They know the needs. They do the greatest work. They’re navigators and trusted advocates. I’m proud of the BCCO. They have impacted my family, helping my 50-year-old mom with her citizenship test. I see the BCCO’s effect on the community and the whole of Columbus.

— Surya Dulal, CRT, CPhT
Co-Owner, CEO Lifeline Pharmacy
Graduated from Ohio State University with a degree in Respiratory Therapy
Arrived in Columbus with his family in 2009, one of the first Bhutanese refugee families in Central Ohio
JOURNEY TO AMERICA

**THE BHUTANESE REFUGEE**

### 1624
First migration of families from Nepal to Bhutan. Bhutan's spiritual ruler, Lama Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, signs formal document with Nepal King Ram Shah to recruit 50 families of skilled Nepali artisans to construct Buddhist Dzongs (fortified buildings housing Buddhist schools) and monasteries in Bhutan. They receive citizenship.

### 1890
Bhutan invites Nepali citizens to immigrate to Bhutan to clear the jungles in the south, establish fertile terraced farmlands and farm the lands. These lands later would provide the majority of Bhutan's food supply.

### 1947
Britain hands over India, creating India's independence. Britain defines the boundaries of Bhutan.

### 1958
The Nationality Law of Bhutan enacted. In it, Bhutan's King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck grants Bhutanese citizenship to Bhutanese Nepali's "permanently domiciled" (living) in Bhutan, as well as their direct descendants.

### 1959
Bhutan enacts a Citizenship Act dubbed “One Nation. One People.” which strictly targets the growing ethnic Nepali Bhutanese population who were predominantly farmers in the south. The act’s intent is to “purify” the country into one homogenous Buddhist religion, education and culture, and to remove Bhutanese Nepali citizens from the nation.

### 1968
India takes over small territories bordering Bhutan. Bhutan’s isolated monarchy and inability to defend itself leads to agreement that India would control Bhutan’s foreign policy. India wants access to Bhutan’s hydro-electric power resources and fears a “Greater Nepal” movement of ethnic Nepali living in India’s “7 Sisters” states in Northeast India.

### 1972
With their land, homes, culture, religion, jobs, and rights being stripped away, some Bhutanese Nepali citizens hold peaceful demonstrations in southern Bhutan. King Wangchuck sends his army in to violently crack down on protesters, harass families and Bhutanese Nepali villages. Thousands of men arrested arbitrarily, tortured and held in prison. Some die. Women raped. Homes burned. The King’s army goes door to door, confiscating citizenship cards. They give families 24 hours to leave Bhutan. They force individuals, under duress, to sign “Voluntary Migration Forms” that say they are leaving the country “happily” of their own will.

### 1985
Bhutan conducts a census but only in the southern region where the Bhutanese-Nepali citizens live. King Wangchuck demands residents produce a land tax receipt specifically from the year 1958 or be designated an “illegal immigrant.” He fears the growing Bhutanese Nepali population and wants to strip them of their citizenship, even though they have lived there for generations.

### 1988
The Bhutanese-Nepali population makes up close to one-third of Bhutan’s 600,000 population.

### 1989
Bhutanese-Nepali population makes up close to one-third of Bhutan’s 600,000 population.

### 1990
Bhutanese refugees began fleeing Bhutan in late 1990, arriving in India. They set up ramshackle camps and hope to return to Bhutan. Bhutan’s persecution of the Bhutanese Nepali only increases. India refuses requests to establish a refugee camp. A group of 94 refugees crosses into Nepal and establishes a makeshift camp — called Maidhar — by the banks of the Kankai Mai River in February 1991. Thousands of refugee families arrive every month to the Maidhar camp. With overcrowding, unclean water and poor sanitation, river flooding, and few resources or medical help, conditions grow grim. Outbreaks of cholera and dysentery kill thousands, including many children, over the next year.

The UN Refugee Agency UNHCR and the government of Nepal recognize the humanitarian disaster and agree to establish UN refugee camps in Nepal to house the burgeoning refugee numbers.

The United States offers to resettle 60,000 of the Bhutanese refugees. Several other countries, including Canada, New Zealand and Australia, follow suit.

The number of Bhutanese refugees living in the seven UN camps tops 108,000. Thousands more live without refugee status protection in Nepal and India.

On February 28, 2008, the first Bhutanese refugee, Pingala Dhital, and her family arrive in Seattle. In June 2008, the first Bhutanese refugee families arrive in Columbus, Ohio, to start their new lives.

The first Bhutanese refugee families in Columbus form the Bhutanese-Nepali Community of Columbus (BNCC) civic organization in September 2009 to serve the needs of the increasing population. In March 2012, BNCC receives 501(c)3 IRS designation, and is renamed the Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio in 2017.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the BCCO creates an innovative program called BRAVE to provide culturally appropriate trusted health information, screenings, PPE, food, medications and fiscal support, and access to vaccines for refugees. The BRAVE model is adopted by other cities in the U.S.
Stateless without a country, decades languishing with no rights, property, possessions, or a sense of the future. Fighting to survive another day . . . yet maintaining hope and community.

Refugees face remarkable mental, emotional and physical strife. But they also know how to persevere against great odds. And if and when they can resettle in a democracy like America, they do so with gratitude and a resolve few can match. They value their new hardearned freedoms. They pursue any opportunity with gusto. Given the chance, their indomitable spirit can overcome high barriers and build a brighter future.

From the day the first Bhutanese-Nepali refugee families arrived in Columbus in 2008, they bonded together and embraced their new home. Within a year, the first group of 20 families created a civic organization called the Bhutanese-Nepali Community of Columbus, the precursor to the BCCO.

Today, Columbus’ continued population growth and wide-ranging opportunities mirror the growth of Bhutanese-Nepali families moving here through direct resettlement and, in greater numbers, via secondary migration from other cities across the U.S and Canada. The Bhutanese American community continues to create new businesses and jobs, provide critical health care, lead non-profits, pursue higher education, and serve as elected officials.

**They simply make Central Ohio better.**

Bhutanese-Americans and other former refugees contribute much to our community and state, both economically and culturally. Known for their work ethic and collective spirit as employees in companies

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**Devyani Basnet**  
*Owner, Devyani Beauty Salon & The Threading Place businesses*  
*Born in refugee camp*  
*Moved to Columbus from Massachusetts with her family in 2015*
throughout the region, their economic impact can also be seen in the many businesses started by Bhutanese refugee entrepreneurs in Columbus, Reynoldsburg, Gahanna, Pataskala, Etna, Westerville, Blacklick, Dublin and other Central Ohio cities.

These range from a home health care company headquartered in Columbus serving five states and with thousands of employees to a woman-owned beauty salon in Dublin and Westerville with several employees.

“We thank America for bringing us here,” says Keshav Acharya, director of human resources for Intra-National Home Care LLC. “This great nation has given us an opportunity and we’re proud to create businesses and jobs, and serve the community with services. We spent 20 years in the camps with no identity or rights. It’s important now to pay it forward.”

Columbus-based Intra-National Home Care LLC, founded by former Bhutanese refugee and now CEO Dilli Adhikari in 2013, provides in-home care services to individuals and families in several states. Adhikari had found that many Bhutanese senior citizens were facing barriers to resettlement, leaving them isolated and damaging their health, and saw the need for a company which could deliver culturally appropriate home care to diverse communities.

The company, along with three other home health care businesses and a trucking firm, now has 2,650 employees in Ohio and more than 5,800 total in five states.

In 2012, I talked with a Bhutanese community leader friend I knew from the refugee camp. He said Columbus was a good place to open up a business. So I borrowed money from friends and started the businesses here. COVID was a challenge but we’re building back now. I feel also that it’s very, very important for our community to have an organization like BCCO. They speak our language, know our history and culture. The BCCO is a bridge to America.

— Uttam Rasaily
Owner, Pathivara Jewelers & Pathivara Grocery Store
Born in Bhutan and lived 19 years in refugee camp
Part of a five-generation family history of jewelry businesses
Moved to Columbus from Buffalo with his family in 2012
Refugees are more likely to start a business. The percentage of employed refugees in Franklin County who are business owners is 13.6 percent, which is more than double the general Franklin County rate of entrepreneurship (6.5 percent).


A trusted hub for agencies, schools, businesses and refugees

While the Bhutanese community boosts the Columbus area and Ohio economy in many ways, the BCCO positively impacts the region on several fronts. BCCO’s team fields calls daily from local and state government agencies, health departments, hospitals and clinics, businesses, school, public safety and judicial systems and others who turn to the BCCO for knowledge, guidance and assistance.

BCCO provides crucial, culturally appropriate case management services directly to clients every day. Its team also connects to its extensive community partner network to refer clients who may require additional care or help.

The Bhutanese community sees the BCCO as the indispensable heart and cultural home of Bhutanese Americans in Central Ohio. Throughout its decade as a 501(c)3 non-profit, the BCCO has been the nexus for celebrations of culture, empowerment and mentoring programs, health fairs, yoga and sports, family gatherings and remembrances, and community forums on the important issues of the day.

Soma Thapa, BCCO case manager, helps a blind client with a form. Through the HHS Office of Resettlement grant, BCCO serves many vulnerable Bhutanese Americans and other refugees.

Celebrating culture and strengthening community at BCCO.
The BCCO’s impact goes beyond Columbus too, as it joins with other Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) leaders in Ohio to now advocate for and protect the lives of Asian-Americans. And recognizing the importance of the BCCO to Ohio’s immigrant and refugee communities, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine appointed Sudarshan Pyakurel, executive director of the BCCO, to a second term on the governor’s New Americans Advisory Committee in early 2021.

“I truly appreciate all of Sudarshan’s work on behalf of the citizens of Ohio,” says DeWine. “His continued service and contributions to the New Americans Advisory Committee help make Ohio a better place to live, work and raise a family.”

Everybody should exercise their political rights. It’s important to enjoy the freedoms this country has bestowed on us. Our rights were taken away in Bhutan because we could not exercise our political rights. There can be a consequence of not voting — don’t lose your rights again.

— Bhuwan Pyakurel
Born in Bhutan and lived 18 years in refugee camp
Moved to Columbus from Colorado with his family in 2014
Became a Reynoldsburg City Councilmember in 2019, the first Bhutanese-Nepali to be elected to public office in America
BCCO Board Chairperson, 2018
The COVID-19 pandemic placed new deep fiscal burdens on the Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio, as our community center closed and revenue from programs, classes, events and space rental evaporated. At the same time, the community’s demand for our services and time, programs, material support, and trusted information grew exponentially which increased expenses.

Thankfully, many individuals, businesses, foundations, government entities and organizations answered the call. They invested in the BCCO because they believe in the great difference this organization makes in the lives of so many in Central Ohio and beyond.

The BCCO is grateful to all who support our life-changing services and work. The needs of the community continue to grow, and the BCCO will be there to meet them.

### Revenues and Expenditures

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### BCCO Revenue 2020

- Direct Federal Grants
- Local, Regional Grants
- Individual & Business Financial Donations
- SBA Paycheck Protection Program
Since coming to the state of Ohio in 2016, Amazon has been honored to work with partners like the Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio to give back to the local community where our associates live and work. We feel fortunate to have created more than 2,500 full-time jobs that welcome people of Columbus and surrounding areas into the Amazon family, and we look forward to continuing our partnership and investment.

— Derek Hotchkiss
Amazon Director of Operations, Etna (Central Ohio) Center

With Gratitude
For Our Major Funding Partners

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement
BCCO is supported by the Ethnic Community Self-Help Program grant from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in HHS’ Administration for Children and Families.

United Way of Central Ohio

THE CITY OF COLUMBUS
ANDREW J. GINThER, MAYOR
COLUMBUS PUBLIC HEALTH

Franklin County
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

CareSource

The Giving Store
CRIS deeply values our long-standing partnership with BCCO. BCCO’s work as an ethnically based community organization is essential for carrying out our common mission of assisting refugees and immigrants in Central Ohio to thrive. In this past year we have worked together on several projects, including food distribution to seniors and citizenship classes. Our experiences in working together over many years have been overwhelmingly positive. BCCO is a caring, competent, professional organization and an asset to Central Ohio.

— Angela K. Plummer, Esq.
Executive Director
Community Refugee & Immigration Services

With thanks
FOR OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND SUPPORTERS

Community Refugee and Immigration Services (CRIS)
US Together
Ethiopian Tewahedo Social Services (ETSS)
Jewish Family Services
ASHA Ray of Hope
Legal Aid Society of Columbus
Ohio Asian American Health Coalition
The Women’s Fund of Central Ohio
The National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) Franklin County
ADAMH Board of Franklin County
Lower Lights Health Center
Primary One Health
Net Care
The Ohio State University College of Social Work
The Ohio State University James Cancer Center
OSU Medical Center Harding Hospital
Nationwide Children’s Hospital
SAMHSA — U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services
Bhutanese American Student Organization
Center for New Americans
Anomatic
SK Food Group
When Mary visited BCCO with her father this winter, Soma Thapa, BCCO case manager, gave her a mask to keep her safe. Mary pumped her fist with glee, taking on new superhero powers. You can be a superhero too and create a bright future for Mary and many other refugees in Central Ohio. Please support BCCO’s vital work. Donate at: bccoh.org.

The 184,800 immigrants in Central Ohio in 2019 contributed $15.4 billion to the metro area’s GDP and $2.1 billion to area tax revenues, according to a 2021 report from New American Economy, a national bipartisan research organization.

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2020 Annual Report & The Bhutanese Refugee Journey to America

Gary Snyder
Managing editor/writing

Jennifer Brinckerhof
Art direction/design

Soma Thapa, Priya Sharma and Gary Snyder
Photography

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MISSION
Every day, the Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio supports refugees and immigrants with essential, culturally appropriate social and health services and empowers them through education and advocacy. The BCCO serves as a resource to local and state agencies and organizations, and as a national model for other non-profits which serve New Americans.

The United States Refugee Admissions Program embodies America’s commitment to protect the most vulnerable, and to stand as a beacon of liberty and refuge to the world. It’s a statement about who we are, and who we want to be.

— President Joe Biden, May 3, 2021