Unity without Uniformity

Celebrating 100 Years of the International Institute of Minnesota
In December 2019, the International Institute of Minnesota proudly celebrated its centennial – 100 years of service for and with New Americans. We honored this milestone through special community events and initiatives, like this remarkable Unity Without Uniformity exhibit.

In the pages that follow, you’ll see how the Institute has adapted to the evolving needs of New Americans in Minnesota. Much has changed over the past century, but one thing hasn’t: immigrants and refugees still come to Minnesota seeking safety, community and the opportunity to thrive. The Institute is here to help ensure that happens.

Every day people walk through our doors with dreams and ambitions, eager to work hard to move their lives forward and push past overwhelming loss, change and institutional barriers. Their presence in our communities shows us the meaning of patience, persistence and graciousness in pursuit of a new life in an unfamiliar place.

Although restrictive policies and dangerous rhetoric have been a threat to New Americans’ livelihoods and the organizations that serve them, we are confident that we are on a path to building a more welcoming state and nation — in partnership with all our neighbors. As community members witness how New Americans strengthen neighborhoods, fill critical jobs and imbue the state with rich culture and knowledge, barriers begin to crumble.

As demand for our high-quality programs continues to rise, we are committed to expanding our services to extend our reach even further. We envision a community where every New American can reach their full potential and find respect, support and safety.

Thank you for your commitment to our mission over the past century and the years to come.

With gratitude,

Jane Graupman
The International Institute of Minnesota has served New Americans from more than 100 countries since 1919. This visual illustrates the changing regional identities of New Minnesotans using census data.

- **1919:** The International Institute of St. Paul opened. Foreign-born people made up over 20% of Minnesota's population.
- **1924:** The Immigration Act of 1924 restricted immigration, favoring homogeneity from Western Europe.
- **1965:** Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 prioritized skilled-workers and family reunification, opening up immigration for non-Northern Europeans.
- **1980:** Refugee Act of 1980 created formal refugee program in line with UN standards.
- **1990:** The 1990 Immigration Act increased immigration and created Diversity Visa Lottery.
- **2017:** The International Institute of Minnesota served people from 98 countries in one year. Immigrants made up about 8% of the population in Minnesota.

Source: Census data provided by Minnesota Compass. Numbers are an approximation.
Creating a “City of Friends”

“The International Institute in St. Paul came into existence just after the first World War when the realization dawned that people of many nationalities were living in segregated groups cut off almost entirely from participation in the life of the United States.”

-Bess Leuthold Beebe
First President of the Institute’s Board of Directors

Rejecting the Melting Pot

“Assimilation is a two-way street. It is not enough for the foreign-born to accept America. That is only half the story. The older Americans must accept these newer ones.”

-Alice Littlequist Sickels
Executive Secretary of the International Institute 1931-1944

Founded in December 1919, the International Institute of Minnesota (at that time called the International Institute in Saint Paul) began as a service bureau of the YWCA.

From the outset, the Institute helped the “foreign born” to learn English, build community, and access services. Run and staffed by women, the Institute served women, men, and children, whereas the YWCA only served single women.

In the first two years, the Institute partnered with 52 agencies to reach people of 13 nationalities. Three workers conducted 800 home visits.

In the 1920s, the Institute advocated for the value of diversity and acceptance in conversations still relevant today.

During the 1930s and into the 1940s, Mexican migration in Saint Paul faced hostility and discrimination. Approximately two million Mexicans and Mexican-Americans were deported or expelled from the U.S., including at least 15% of the population in Saint Paul.

Beyond providing English classes to Mexican-Americans in Saint Paul, the Institute engaged in advocacy, working to dispel myths and ultimately publishing a report about the community in 1938.

The Festival of Nations, started by the Institute in 1932 (then called the International Exhibits), quickly became a touchstone of Minnesotans’ cultural pluralism. It showcased cultural exhibits, ethnic performances, and international food stalls to create acceptance and celebrate the diverse cultures of Minnesotans.
A Pattern for a Peaceful Way of Life

The Festival of Nations in Wartime

Six months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the U.S. entry into World War II, 33 cultural groups and 3,000 volunteers participated in the sixth Festival of Nations. However, it almost did not happen. There was a great discussion of whether a peaceful gathering of cultures was possible in 1942.

"The decision was to go ahead with the Festival because it was more needed in wartime than any other time..." said Ross Leuthold Bebee, General Chairman of the Festival.

No flags were on display and an interfaith prayer was offered. The Italian group withdrew but the Germans voted to stay in. Other Italians in the community heard about this and offered to participate in the ethnic dance program. They received a standing ovation after their performance.

Displaced by Prejudice

Japanese Americans Find Home In Minnesota

In 2012, the International Visitors Bureau sponsored the St. Paul Restitution Committee to restitute Japanese Americans [WAG] from internment camps on the West Coast. More than 23,000 Japanese Americans were forcibly removed from their homes during this time.

From August 1941 to August 1944, the committee operated the St. Paul Restitution Hotel near the prison, housing newly arrived Japanese American families and helping them find work.

Japanese Americans lived in Minnesota according to the census. By 1950, the number grew to more than 200,000, including the nearly 5,000 Japanese Americans working at the Military Intelligence Service Language Centers.

The U.S. army recruited and drafted these men to work as linguists in the war effort, and released them from California to Camp Shafter in 1945, then to Fort Snelling in 1946. They were credited with shortening the war by two years, saving nearly a million lives and billions of dollars.
In September of 1952, the President of the Institute’s Board of Directors, Mrs. Kate Skiles Klein (second from right, standing), traveled to New York City harbor to welcome the first group of displaced people from the Venezia Giulia camp in Italy. Courtesy of the International Institute of Minnesota.

Reflecting A Troubled World

The Aftermath of WWII and the Cold War

The year 1945 saw great world changes. The problems brought to the International Institute reflected the problems of a troubled world.

-1945 Institute annual report

After World War II, the International Institute was prepared to receive war refugees (displaced persons) to Minnesota. The Displaced Persons Act (1948-1952) allowed a total of 499,000 Eastern Europeans to come to the U.S. Of those who found a home in Minnesota, only a fraction of Polish Americans, though the Institute, along with other refugee agencies, offered services to assist them in finding work and medical care.

In 1951, the International Institute opposed the McCarran-Walter Act. A product of the Cold War, it explicitly barred immigrants from communist countries. The restrictive law ultimately passed, with an exception. It opened the door for Chinese, Korean, and Japanese immigrants to secure the long-denied right to citizenship. The International Institute helped them adjust.

The end of the Vietnam War began a new era for the International Institute of Minnesota. The Refugee Migration and Resettlement Assistance Act of 1975 created an official refugee status and allowed 130,000 refugees from the Vietnam War to resettle in the U.S.

The Institute took its role in the program, before ultimately welcoming three generations of refugees from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. In 1979, the Institute helped welcome an emergency arrival of 3,000 refugees to Minnesota.

In the next years between 1975 to 2000, the growing population in Minnesota grew from zero to 10,000. The Agency moved to Minnesota to fill a personnel need for the communist regime in Laos, many of whom came to Minnesota working with the CIA. They were the largest group resettled by the Institute throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s.

The Agency became a strong community, and Saint Paul grew to be the largest refugee population per capita in America.
The Land of Lakes Welcomes the Nation of Poets

"Being a young Muslim, Somali man, I realized I have a role in my community. Poetry is not just a speech, it's an action."

-AbdiIfahat Farah aka Abdi Phenomenal
award-winning Somali poet, based in Minneapolis

In the 1950s, the Institute began to welcome refugees from Somalia, the "Nation of Poets," along with people fleeing violence from around the world, including Kosovo and Liberia.

In 1998, the Institute was among the first to receive 15% of the U.S. national quota for Africans. The Somali community grew rapidly in part because of the 1996 immigration act.

Today, there are more Somalis in Minnesota than any other state. Nearly one in three people with Somali ancestry in the U.S. live in Minnesota. The availability of jobs and sense of community make Minnesota the most desired destination for secondary migration in the U.S., and Somali-Minnesotans contribute greatly to the community as business owners, artists and politicians.

From 1980-2018, the International Institute of Minnesota resettled nearly 25,000 refugees from 37 countries.
In 2019, the International Institute of Minnesota remains a thriving welcome center for immigrants and refugees on Como Avenue in Saint Paul: serving 4000 people from 100 countries every year. Its mission to help New Americans achieve self-sufficiency and full membership in American life. The same pillars that the Institute was founded on in 1919 guide its major programs:

**Refugee Services**
From serving the displaced from the World Wars, to welcoming the first official refugees, providing casework for new arrivals has long been the core of the Institute’s work.

**Workforce Development**
Started in 1990, the Institute’s Medical Careers Pathway has helped 2900 New Americans find work as nursing assistants, nurses, and other medical professionals. In 2013, the Institute created the Hospitality Careers Pathway to help newly-arrived women with limited English skills find jobs to address immediate financial stability.

**Immigration Services**
Since the beginning, the Institute has recognized citizenship as an important achievement for New Americans, teaching classes, offering application assistance and hosting ceremonies. The Institute has helped 12,000 people apply for citizenship since 2001.

**Education**
The Institute has offered English classes to New Americans since 1919, recognizing language learning as one of the most important steps to building a life in Minnesota.

**Festival of Nations**
From 1932 to today, the Festival of Nations remains a celebration of the many ethnic communities that shape Minnesota, now attracting 50,000 people each year.
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MINNESOTA COMPASS

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