

Ukrainian Refugees Find New Beginnings in Chicago Healthcare

ACCOUNT SPOTLIGHT

In 2022, as war tore through Ukraine, a wave of refugees sought sanctuary in Chicago, bringing with them their dreams, unique talents, and a determination to rebuild their lives. Among them was Iryna Kolomiichuk, a Ukrainian mother and wife who lived next door to Ascension Living Resurrection Village Life Center, a provider of short-term rehabilitation, long-term nursing care, and memory support. Iryna, and those who followed her lead, transformed TouchPoint's Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) team in Chicago and built a community.



A Knock on the Door

When Iryna approached the medical facility's receptionist, she explained, in broken English, that she was looking for a kitchen job. Caroline Ardell, Field Project Engineer, was called to the front desk to help make sense of the situation.

Caroline had recently tried filling her facility's FNS vacancies through a collaboration with World Relief, a global humanitarian organization that partners with local communities to develop sustainable, locally driven solutions to some of the world's most urgent problems. Understanding that their facility was seated among a large Ukrainian population, World Relief posted and shared TouchPoint's job openings, though the posts were met with little to no interest.

Communication with Iryna was challenging, but Caroline discerned that she was earnest and determined. Recognizing an opportunity, Caroline asked Iryna to return in thirty minutes when a Ukrainian-speaking Certified Nursing Assistant could help translate. She returned as promised, and the three sat down to discuss her skills, background, and needs.

Iryna explained that she had worked in kitchens in Ukraine and was eager to contribute. She lived next door to the facility and had no car, making workplace proximity a critical factor. Caroline gave her a tour of the kitchen, using Google Translate to explain the job requirements and necessary paperwork. By the end of the day, Iryna was hired.

A Family United

A week later, Iryna approached Caroline, asking if there might be an opening for her older son Viktor, a trained chef. Caroline, knowing the Catered Living community next door needed kitchen staff, connected him with a position as a cook.

Within another week, Iryna returned to inquire about work for her younger son, Valerii. He was soon hired as a part-time FNS associate. Not long after, the family's network expanded further when the son's girlfriend Olesia joined the FNS team as a prep cook.

The facility adjusted to accommodate the family, understanding their unique situation and desire to remain close to one another. These decisions proved beneficial, not only for the family but also for the facility's operations.



Creating a Network

As time went on, the Ukrainian family became pivotal in helping grow their FNS team and assist others in the community like themselves. With more FNS positions open, Caroline sought assistance from Olesia, the youngest Ukrainian associate, who was adept at social media. With guidance from Caroline, Olesia created recruitment posts on Ukrainian-focused job websites.

The posts generated a wave of applicants – twenty phone calls, some in English, some in Russian, and some in Ukrainian and Polish; and fifteen emails translated from Russian and Polish to English. Interest was high enough that Caroline was able to redirect some of the applicants to other nearby TouchPoint facilities in need of staff.

Through this informal network, the facility hired several new employees, including prep cooks and food service workers. The initiative showcased the power of community and resourcefulness in addressing staffing shortages while supporting the refugees.

RESULTS OF THE UKRAINIAN JOB SITE CAMPAIGN

- Hires: 7 (in 1 year, 9 months)
- Interviews: 12 (in-person), 15 (phone)
- Email Inquiries: 15
- Voicemail Inquiries: 20
- Applications via the Compass Group website: 6
- Positions Hired: Prep Cook, FNS team (full-time and part-time)

Challenges and Triumphs

While the new associates found their work fulfilling, they were presented with challenges. Many refugees spoke little or no English. To address this, these associates enrolled in language classes to help improve their communication skills. Though these classes were often held in the evening after full day shifts, the refugees were committed, and participation was strong. Visas required regular renewals, adding another layer of complexity to their new lives. Despite these hurdles, they persevered, motivated by the desire to build a stable foundation for their families.

The TouchPoint team became an extended family for the refugees. When government forms or healthcare documents were difficult to understand, they turned to Caroline for help. The mutual support fostered a deep sense of belonging and camaraderie within the group.

"I'm proud to help them," Caroline said. "Iryna's husband is still in Ukraine. He's unable to come here and she can't visit him. They've been separated for nearly three years. My heart goes out to them."

A Diverse and United Team

The inclusion of refugees added a unique dynamic to the TouchPoint kitchen. Employees from Ukraine, the Philippines, Poland, and other countries bonded over shared experiences, forming a tightly knit community. Celebrations of birthdays and cultural traditions became common, and the FNS team grew into a microcosm of unity and kindness.

"It's like one big happy family," Caroline said. "They're proud of each other and always willing to help. It's been a learning experience for all of us, but it shows how community comes together to embrace and support each other."

Looking Ahead

Inspired by their success, the facility is exploring ways to formalize its refugee hiring program. Caroline plans to reconnect with World Relief and expand partnerships with local refugee communities. The goal is to create a sustainable pipeline of opportunities for those seeking a fresh start.

The story of Ascension Living Resurrection Village is one of resilience, generosity, and transformation. By opening their doors to these refugees, the TouchPoint team addressed critical staffing needs and fostered a spirit of inclusivity that enriched their community. For the Ukrainian family that started it all, and for many others, this was more than just a job – it was a second chance.



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– Caroline Ardell,
Field Project Engineer, TouchPoint

