

## APHA

### **Community engagement and capacity building to improve refugee and immigrant health**

**Background:** Current political rhetoric has stoked fear and stigmatization among Somali refugee and immigrant communities across the U.S. Distrust of law enforcement, fears of deportation, criminalization, and threats of family separation impacts community receptivity to discussions about Female Genital Cutting (FGC). Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), essential methodology when addressing health disparities among vulnerable communities, remains foundational to enabling and sustaining robust partnerships with FGC-affected communities.

**Methods:** CBPR focused community expertise on development of our Community Health Needs Assessment Survey; increased community capacity through training on protection of human subjects, mobilization and training of trusted community members to recruit participants, conduct surveys and facilitate community forums; and respectful dissemination of findings to the Somali community.

**Results:** CBPR efforts enabled partnerships linking the project team to 12 community stakeholders, and over 60 trusted community liaisons. Challenges included: limited health and financial literacy, language barriers, cautious skepticism, extreme fear of detainment and/or deportation, and at times, refusal of study participation. Nurtured CBPR partnerships enabled completion of 879 surveys, and community forums engaging 160 Somali women, men, youth, elders and religious leaders.

**Conclusion:** CBPR approaches mediated unforeseen challenges, allowing collection of rich, meaningful data. Insights gleaned may inform future research studies within Somali communities. Nurturing sustained partnerships with FGC-affected communities to foster trust, dialogue, education, and community outreach will enhance culturally-sensitive approaches to prevent FGC among female minors and care for FGC-affected women. Community engagement efforts must empower both men and women to increase their health-seeking behavior while supporting efforts to eradicate the practice.