

International Institute of St. Louis

HOW IMMIGRANTS HELP OUR COMMUNITY DURING COVID-19



Members of the organization St. Louis Vietnamese Community have sewn more than 5,000 masks to help address the shortage of protective face masks for St. Louis area healthcare workers and first responders. Photo Wayne Crosslin/International Institute

It is well known that immigrants help new immigrants find their way and thrive in our community every day. For the area's long-established Vietnamese community members, this practice means assuming responsibility for supplying new refugees and immigrants who were sheltering at home with essential personal protective equipment (PPE).

To assist International Institute's refugee clients, St. Louis Vietnamese Community, a nonprofit organization, organized individual seamstresses to sew 800 protective face masks and business owners to donate other PPE supplies that are in demand. Among the many clients who received the items were refugees who arrived just a week before the shelter-in-place orders took effect in St. Louis.

"My parents and I were sponsored by International Institute when we arrived in the U.S. when I was four," said Kristina Le, president of St. Louis Vietnamese Community. "Knowing the hardships new arrivals face in a regular resettlement environment, coupled with COVID-19 and its regulations, I knew we would want to donate what was needed to IISTL and their efforts."

"Everyone wanted to contribute to the 'pay it forward' momentum," continues Le. "If people weren't able to sew, they wanted to donate fabric. If they couldn't donate, they wanted to help transport supplies. They wanted to help with deliveries."

While the initial ask was for individuals to sew masks, Vietnamese business owners were quick to respond with donations of surplus hand sanitizer, disinfectant supplies, and face masks they already had at their businesses. Many who donated are employees or successful owners of area nail salons. Le was overwhelmed with the number of items they were collecting not just for the Institute, but for the St. Louis community.

Like many former refugees and immigrants, Le says their efforts came from a place of wanting to support anyone and everyone in the greater community they could. “If we’re able to provide an extra sewn mask for just one frontline worker or first responder, we’ve done our part,” she says.

“It’s been amazing to see all the efforts that the Vietnamese community has made to support our St. Louis neighbors,” adds Le.

St. Louis Vietnamese Community has donated more than 5,000 masks across the St. Louis area to hospitals and frontline worker offices, including Children’s Hospital, North County Post Office and St. Louis City and County Police Departments.



Kristina Le (right), and another member of St. Louis Vietnamese Community load PPE face masks to deliver to International Institute of St. Louis.