

# #KnowPublicHealth



## Reaching the Underserved: Walking Alongside Pregnant Immigrant and Refugee Women

**Issue:** Buena Vista County's community includes a largely diverse population, including Hispanics, Asians, Africans and Central and South Americans. The Storm Lake School District population is 80% minority. These statistics are unique to other nearby counties. Work opportunities in such industries as meat packing and egg processing plants have drawn immigrants and refugees to rural counties. Many of the newcomers don't know how to access health services and navigate the system. The Burmese population of young Iowa mothers have spent many years in refugee camps, often in Thailand. They come here with no knowledge of giving birth in the United States health care system or the acceptable child-rearing practices in this U.S. community.

Birth classes provided by the local hospital are offered in English only and their time allotment does not allow them to speak in simple English or to accommodate for these young women's needs. In Buena Vista County, the public health agency saw a need to assist young immigrant and refugee women who are pregnant and have young children.



**Taking Action:** The Family STEPS program is an in-home visitation program for at-risk young families in Buena Vista county. Through this program, public health workers help young immigrant and refugee women prepare for childbirth and walk alongside them after birth of their newborn as they learn about the American and Midwest culture and the health care system.

Building upon the education provided to these young mothers by the hospital, the Family STEPS workers provide one-on-one attention and take time to support them in their new roles as moms.

The Family STEPS program teaches these women about pregnancy, accessing financial resources, finding a local physician and encourages their compliance with needed appointments. Part of this

program includes a tour of the hospital, but especially the obstetrics department prior to the birth of their baby. This advance visit helps to reduce the stress of the mother once labor has started.

After the baby is born, public health continues to follow the family in their home. The Family STEPs staff also provide education related to parenting skills, including appropriate discipline and developmental milestones for the child. Referrals are made to appropriate resources if deficits are found during this process. All visits are provided with an interpreter for the needed language. The local public health agency plans to continue to reach out to young minority populations as they seem to have a need for more one-on-one attention than what our local hospital can provide.

**Impact:** Participants in the Family STEPs program, including immigrant and refugee mothers, gain knowledge and confidence to be good parents and raise healthy children which has a positive impact on the larger community.

Studies show that home visits for pregnant women are a highly effective measure for ensuring the birth of healthy babies. Home visits for first-time mothers also have a profound effect on children's well-being later in life, which could ensure success for families immigrating to our state.

(See <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3943375> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/upshot/how-home-visits-by-nurses-help-mothers-and-children-especially-boys.html>)

