

Area of Emphasis Scholars

social work with immigrants and refugees

25 - 26 YEAR IN REVIEW



Amy Smith, MSW, LICSW, Clinical Faculty & AEIR Coordinator

Welcome! The Area of Emphasis in Social Work Practice with Immigrants and Refugees (AEIR) prepares MSW students to engage in thoughtful, responsive, and justice-oriented practice with clients and communities navigating migration, displacement, and the process of resettlement. Our scholars are committed to defending belonging for immigrants and advocating for the rights and dignity of our immigrant communities.

Our amazing 2025-2026 cohort of twelve AEIR Scholars engaged in a wide range of meaningful activities, experiences, and opportunities throughout the year, including: Co-sponsorship of the Shurden Lecture: Criminalizing Mercy: Sanctuary and Government Repression of Migrant Justice, participation in the Fall Immigration Forum at the U of MN Binger Center for New Americans, and a Unidos training on immigration raid response for healthcare workers. Additionally, we hosted mini-trainings on the immigration legal system, clinical care with political trauma survivors, best practices in working with interpreters, and attending Crossing the Line: The Passport Re-Imagined art exhibit. We wrapped up our time together celebrating our five graduating scholars as they shared their reflections through the AEIR portfolio presentations. Our 2025-2026 AEIR year was also marked by the impact of Operation Metro Surge and rapidly shifting federal immigration policies, creating intense fear and uncertainty for our immigrant communities. Throughout this time AEIR scholars witnessed both the profound challenges facing immigrant communities and the remarkable solidarity that emerged across our state to defend the belonging of immigrant neighbors. The following reflections offer a glimpse into the lived experience of our scholars--how they are making meaning of this work, what they have learned from alongside the communities they serve, and what continues to ground and inspire them as social workers dedicated to practice with immigrants and refugees.



2025-2026 AEIR NEWSLETTER



John Lee

Q: What originally drew you to focus on immigrant and refugee communities and how do you think this period of history will shape the kind of social worker you become?

A: I am a first-generation immigrant in my family. I live through this moment and realize that it is becoming more challenging for social workers to serve the immigrant and refugee communities, as public policies are being implemented to take away the rights of immigrants and refugees. It has already begun, as major changes in eligibility for public assistance for immigrants and refugees are already taking place.

It validates my beliefs that we need to stand up for each other, and that silence and connivance encourage more oppression and social injustice. This allows me to learn, through a unique era in American history, how people behave based on their political views, and that moral values can change if they are presented with a reason that appeals to their emotions. I also learned what happens when social media is used irresponsibly to distribute false information, to sway public opinion, and how critical it is not to believe everything we read or learn.

Trauma can be caused by one single incident; however, the effect of that trauma is far-reaching. I also learned that community resilience is everywhere, and I am encouraged by what I see so far. I also learned that formal education is important for people to distinguish between biased social media and a truthful story.

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Robin Chacko

How This Experience Has Shaped My Understanding of Trauma and Community Resilience

This moment has fundamentally reshaped how I understand both trauma and resilience. Before Metro Surge, I thought of trauma primarily as an individual clinical diagnosis something that happens inside a person's mind and body based on past events. But witnessing what immigrant families have experienced during this wave of enforcement has shown me that trauma is also deeply social and anticipatory. The fear I see in clients is not just about what has already happened to them; it is about what could happen at any moment. A parent sends their child to school and spends the entire day terrified that they will not be there when the child returns home. A client stops attending medical appointments because the bus route passes by an ICE checkpoint. This is not hypervigilance as a symptom it is a rational response to a real and present threat which is exhausting and corrosive in ways that individual therapy alone cannot fix.

At the same time, my understanding of community resilience has deepened beyond the usual social work language of strengths and protective factors. I have witnessed resilience that is not about bouncing back but about holding on together: neighbors organizing carpools so that families without documentation can still get to work, churches opening their doors as safe spaces, parents teaching their children exactly what to say and what not to say if an ICE officer is at the door. This is not resilience as optimism or positive coping, it is resilience as survival strategy, as mutual aid, as people refusing to let their community be torn apart even when the system is trying to do exactly that. What has inspired me most is that this resilience is not happening in spite of fear; it is happening because of it. This moment has taught me that my job as a social worker is not to teach resilience to immigrant communities. They already have it. My job is to get out of their way, to follow their lead, and to use whatever privilege and access I have to advocate for the structural changes that would make their resilience less necessary.

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Morgan Chao

Q: What originally drew you to focus on immigrant and refugee communities, and how has this moment deepened or challenged that commitment?

A: My family came to the United States as refugees in 1975, fleeing Vietnam in search of opportunity while sacrificing so much of themselves in the process. Growing up, I witnessed firsthand the remarkable resilience my family carried, alongside the weight of generational and historical trauma. Mental health was rarely a priority when survival came first. I also saw how much it meant when people showed up for my family during those early years, and that experience inspired a deep commitment in me to do the same for immigrant and refugee communities today.

As a therapist at a community mental health clinic, I've had the privilege of working with clients from a wide range of backgrounds. This current moment has shown me just how much this work matters. I've seen the impact on every level, in individual sessions, in families navigating impossible circumstances, and in the systemic barriers that make an already difficult journey even harder. It has reinforced for me how essential it is to take a whole-person, whole-environment approach to therapy, one that includes advocacy and helping clients access the resources they need, not just the clinical work in the room.

What has truly inspired me through all of this is our community here in the Twin Cities. Watching neighbors come together to provide mutual aid and support for one another has been a powerful reminder of what becomes possible when people refuse to leave each other behind. The clients I've had the honor of serving, and the community surrounding them, continue to deepen my commitment every day.

2025-2026 AEIR NEWSLETTER



Rupa Adhikari

Q: What originally drew you to focus on immigrant and refugee communities, and how has this moment deepened or challenged that commitment?

A: As a refugee myself, I had to learn how to navigate the “new world” for my family and my community while slowly learning how to create space for myself where I can express myself.

I come from a community where talking about mental health issues doesn’t happen, there is rarely language or space that allows for this discourse. It wasn’t until I started to work with the community that I saw how much disconnect there was when it came to seeking help that always rooted in cultural humility or cultural sensitivity.

I wanted to be someone that can utilize my experience as a first-generation refugee to create a space where I can bring in holistic healing and learn how to collaborate “traditional” social work practice and create a space where I can use clients story to help.

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Gina Gresham

Metro Surge was a thoroughly jarring time for myself, my friends and family, and the greater regional community. It both tested community capacity and foreshadowed a darker era that we have been moving towards gradually this past decade. Militarized, violent government action is inherent to the American colonial and imperial project, but this rapid increase in government surveillance and intentional expanded focus on “domestic terrorism” affects a much broader swath of the population than previously.

In my own life, I had friends and family that were targeted, confronted, and harassed by ICE officers. I had previous clients reaching out for resources to help coworkers and neighbors they knew who’d been sent to Dilley or other ICE detention facilities out of state. One of my therapy clients, a 16-year-old third generation Hmong American, didn’t leave her apartment building for a month out of fear of being profiled. Conversely, most of my work within the undocumented community was with clients in South Carolina, which remains mostly untouched by ICE presence; the lack of fear and terror in that community felt very strange this winter, as our communities here were invaded. It highlighted that though ICE continues to operate nationwide, Metro Surge was characterized by its disproportionate presence of officers; much of the country did not experience this, and are not nearly as organized as our communities have had to be.

My takeaway is that the Twin Cities are equipped to tackle this next era of our country, provided we continue to stay alert and active in uplifting all members of our community; even when the threat seems less extreme. I’m proud to play my part as a social worker.

2025-2026 AEIR NEWSLETTER



Samantha Ly

My parents are refugees from Southeast Asia who resettled in the United States over forty years ago as young adults who knew next to no English. I became a social worker seeking to be a clinician who offers the type of support my family needed but did not receive. My parents' daily struggles inform my practice as I seek to create a safe space where all questions are welcome.

As Operation Metro Surge escalated, I was balancing my role as an individual therapist in my clinical field placement at an urban high school where less than 10% of students identify as White. Urban and many suburban schools scrambled to offer temporary online learning. Some offered synchronous instruction, but most

offered alternative asynchronous work with limited instruction. Most families who opted for the temporary learning option were families with students of color. Right now, I sit with the disconcerting realization that despite the international news coverage, students of color whose grades dropped during Operation Metro Surge due to temporary online learning will need to advocate for themselves. Many of my students stopped coming for therapy and slipped further into the cracks. When most of them returned, although we talked about federal immigration enforcement, they were not ready to process what happened.

Operation Metro Surge blurred the lines between personal and professional actions and responsibilities. Federal immigration agents tracked the license plates of protesters and labeled them paid professional agitators. There was a need to adapt and work around the inability to use certain cars for home food deliveries for families terrified to leave their homes. I grounded myself in conversations with peers and licensed social workers. We weighed our need for personal safety and professional responsibility to our clients against the risks of being involved in protests or food delivery.

Operation Metro Surge continues to be a source of stress and trauma for community members. The seamless transition to life before Operation Metro Surge is a testament to the resilience of immigrant and refugee communities. However, it is a collective trauma many people have not healed from. It is suffocating to sit with the quiet, devastating realization that it took the deaths of Renee Good and Alex Pretti for individuals in power to snap out of silent acquiescence and act. After all, despite the reallocation of federal immigration officers, we know they are not gone and continue to lurk in the shadows. So, many of us remain vigilant knowing that there is nothing stopping this administration from launching another federal immigration operation. Only once the risk of another federal immigration enforcement operation is gone will immigrant and refugee communities feel safe enough to process and heal.

2025-2026 AEIR NEWSLETTER



Denise Quizhpi

Q: What is something you've witnessed or experienced during this time that has stayed with you or inspired you?

A: Metro Surge was a time of high anxiety for me because of the impact it had on my community. During this time, I witnessed how resilient the Latino community was in supporting each other and lending a helping hand as needed. That gave me hope in seeing that our spirits were not broken down and people stepping up to be in community with each other.



See you next year!