



# East African Youth Collaborative (EAYC)

*Providing a better life and opportunities for our community members*

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## LEAD AGENCY

**UWEAST** (United Women of East Africa Support team)

UWEAST's vision is for East African women to collaboratively shape their impact on the health, education, economic and overall well-being of their families and communities.

## ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERS

UWEAST

UC San Diego Center for Community Health, Refugee Health Unit

Masjid Al Huda

## DV PREVENTION APPROACH

EAYC focuses on three priority areas to address the root causes of domestic violence and create the conditions that support safe relationships through a culturally responsive approach:

1. **Skill building and norm change:** Individual and community knowledge and awareness around how to establish and maintain healthy and safe relationships, uplifting positive cultural and religious norms and challenging cultural norms that perpetuate harmful gender roles.
2. **System change advocacy and service delivery:** Advocacy to ensure access to services and resources and delivery of those services to support a healthy transition from adolescence to adulthood within refugee communities such as youth mentorship, discussion circles, and recreational sports or arts and crafts activities.
3. **Power building:** Youth and adult mentorship and leadership development and coalition-building among local ethnic community-based organizations to advocate within larger systems.

Most refugees share experiences of familial loss, violence, and trauma in their countries of origin and during migration, as well as secondary trauma from resettlement challenges such as intergenerational conflict, community safety, and social isolation. The East African refugee community is also subject to bias and discrimination against refugees, people of color, and Muslims and structural inequities in areas of health, housing, employment, and justice. Additional factors that contribute to domestic violence in the East African community include family experience of trauma, stressors relating to acculturation, patriarchal gender roles, intergenerational gap, engagement in gangs, and abuse of alcohol and drugs. There are also issues of stigma, concerns regarding privacy, and different understandings of the varying forms of domestic violence. At the same time, the community possesses tremendous individual, organizational, collective, cultural, and religious assets that support families and communities in thriving in their new home country.

### GEOGRAPHIC AREA

San Diego

### COMMUNITY OF FOCUS

Refugee community and specifically individuals and families from East Africa living in the City Heights neighborhood

UWEAST staff, and volunteers come from East African refugee and Muslim communities themselves and are a trusted part of the fabric of the community. Building on their shared identities and common experiences, through a culturally sensitive and joyful approach, they cultivate lifelong strong relationships among community members and staff, creating a robust staff and leadership development pipeline and program alumni network.

To work on domestic violence prevention, the collaborative must navigate cultural norms about having public discussions of domestic violence. UWEAST and partners have been able to successfully convene parents, youth, and community members to expand their understanding of DV, its root causes, and its impact on wellbeing of the individual, family, and entire community. They work on building trust and looking for opportunities to integrate discussions of this issue while addressing the topics that are of most interest or concern to youth and adult members of the community (e.g., substance misuse, gun violence, mental health, access to housing and other resources) and building protective factors, while also advocating for systems changes.

### COLLABORATIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS & BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

#### Building collaborative capacity

- EAYC is part of an extensive network of coalitions and collaboratives serving East African refugees in San Diego. UWEAST as the backbone of EAYC was founded in 2008 by mothers in San Diego's East African community. They sought to build bridges between their community and service providers to implement a successful, linguistically appropriate, culturally competent, and cost-effective physical and mental health intervention program. Since then, programming has continued to grow and respond to emerging needs. Rising mental health issues and substance use among young men in the community propelled UWEAST to reach out to partners and form the East African Men and Boys Collaborative to provide opportunities for support, connection, and workforce development. As the mission and programming expanded to support the needs of girls and young women, they changed their name to the East African Youth Collaborative. UWEAST also continues to provide family wellness and safety services including the issue of relationship violence. Programming has expanded to the point that they now require a larger physical space to meet.

*“A highlight for me is the development of relationships with partners in the field of DV and the identification of additional community resources. Our collaborative has also been able to develop culturally literate workshops on the issue of relationship violence.”*

– Collaborative member

- UWEAST is a founding member of the [San Diego Refugee Communities Coalition](#) which is a collective of San Diego County based ethnic community based organizations including from East Africa the Middle East, Central and South Asia, and Haiti communities. SDRCC’s mission is to lead coordinated action that addresses structural inequities faced by refugee communities. The Coalition’s work addresses issues of behavioral health, community health, housing, economic development, and youth work.
- SDRCC recently created a [Young Leaders Council](#) comprised of ten young adult leaders from nine ethnic community-based organizations, including UWEAST. This group gives a voice to the youth of underserved communities to ensure their needs are both heard and met. YLC members receive training in advocacy and programming, as well as opportunities to engage in system change activities. The UC San Diego Center for Community Health, Refugee Health Unit serves as the facilitating organization and backbone of SDRCC.

### Community engagement and power building

#### *Honoring women and mothers*

In all aspects of the work, mothers are honored and celebrated as the source of life and nurtures of future generations. Programs by and for mothers like collective cooking and parenting support enhance the wellbeing and resilience of women and mothers, including addressing generational trauma and building collective leadership and power.

- Baking Connections is a program that brings mothers together to socialize and discuss mental health and self-care, all while baking and cooking.
- More recently, UWEAST has begun focusing on early childhood development through the lens of pregnant women and mothers of children under five years of age.

### *Youth mentorship programming*

UWEAST creates positive programming and a holistic support approach for youth through collaborative community-led programming that develops community ownership and leadership, strengthens positive connection to cultural, racial, and religious identities in the face of structural bias and inequities, and builds a safe, trauma- and healing-informed, and joyful container for reducing and addressing multiple stressors that young people face at a developmentally sensitive period. Continuous input from the community guides efforts and ensures cultural sensitivity and fit. Mentorship equips young people with skills and resources to build healthy relationships and manage conflicts and obstacles within relationships. UWEAST builds joy and playfulness into their activities to support learning and wellbeing.

Programming for girls has been growing and is expanding across generations and age groups. They focus on building connections, youth mentorship, creating supportive networks and incorporating religion to promote positive change while challenging cultural norms and generational trauma when appropriate.

Examples of programming for boys and girls include:

- Facilitating weekly sessions of Journey to Success such as a talk on womanhood and coming of age that builds peer leadership and community, supportive social networks, and solutions-based skills. This program includes quarterly field trips to deepen connections.
- Workshops for college applications and financial aid.
- Discussion circles build healthy relationships skills, and trust, respect, and consent within all relationships.
- Opening their center daily to the community youth to gather where they have a safe space to socialize for social/emotional wellbeing and mentor support. The Youth Hub is a safe and fun space at our center for our youth, supervised by trained peer counselors to hang out, watch games together, get advice, and connect.
- Hosting bonfires and outdoor events to discuss sensitive topics such as consent to support safe relationships.
- Providing weekly recreational sports such as basketball, swimming, soccer, hiking to better physical health which in turn benefits mental health which also promotes safe relationships.

- UWEAST is in the process of launching a youth-focused “Community Power Building Workshop Series” which includes fifteen 2-hour in-person sessions with the youth. The purpose of these workshops is to provide youth with the skills to educate, organize, activate, and lead their community so it can effectively advocate for its needs.

### *Community strengthening events*

- Partnered with The Digital Sisterhood for a three-day conference to unite women of color and counter the pre-existing narrative on what it means to be a Muslim woman. This aligns with UWEAST’s philosophy that no one will represent their unique demographic better than themselves.
- Provided early intervention and diversion services to a population of East African males ages 15 to 30 who are at high risk for engagement with the criminal justice systems, or who already have a history of such engagement.
- Hosted a Know Your Rights Camp addressing what to do in case they are approached by authorities. Also, a housing focused Know Your Rights program to inform the community of their tenant rights.
- Held a drive for the homeless in San Diego providing blankets, jackets, warm clothing, hygiene products.

One issue they are currently addressing is exposure to gun violence. UWEAST is working with the young men to counter these norms and ways of thinking. They also weave in themes of consent and safe relationships and talk openly about these more sensitive topics.

### *Policy and funding shifts*

- Refugee families often face housing discrimination based on race, country of origin, religion, or familial status. The San Diego Wellness Collaborative and the San Diego Refugee Communities Coalition (of which UWEAST is an active member) received a BUILD Health Challenge grant to improve housing stability for refugee populations in El Cajon using a multi-sector, community-driven approach. This bold effort includes upstream advocacy to influence policy and system changes among housing stakeholders, cross-sector community education about housing regulations and the unique challenges faced by refugee populations, and capacity building to better enable refugee populations to understand, navigate, and access housing assistance and processes.

- UWEAST participated in a number of opportunities to share about the needs of their community as well as their successes.
  - Met with councilman Sean Elo-Rivera to address domestic violence and housing issues in the City Heights community.
  - Took part in a Community Roundtable Listening Session with the Governor's Office.
  - Spoke as a Panelist at the San Diego Live Well Advance on the "The Power of Youth-Led Engagement" event which hundreds of people attended.
  - Collaborated with the McAllister Institute to present a Drug and Rehabilitation Meeting
- During the coronavirus pandemic, the San Diego Refugee Communities Coalition advocated with San Diego County agencies for needed resources. With support from one of their partners, UC San Diego Refugee Health Unit, the Coalition surveyed 300 households regarding their concerns as well as areas of hope. Top issues for families included: loss of job or income, students struggling with distance learning, barriers to accessing health care, and concerns about emotional health. With this data the Coalition was able to advocate for additional resources for their communities including emergency response funds and rent-relief programs. Additionally, San Diego County's Health and Human Services Agency funded eight ethnic community-based organizations to provide bilingual outreach and education to help ensure that refugee communities have access to information about COVID testing and resources.