

HEALTH

20 languages, 50 staffers: Milwaukee clinic tailors work to immigrant mental health needs

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For Sebastian Ssempijja, a clinical psychologist and owner of a Glendale-based family and child clinic, a career as a healer wasn't just a life goal.

It was a calling from God.

Born in Uganda, Ssempijja immigrated to the United States in 1979 to attend Marquette University. Today, he owns and operates Sebastian Family Psychology Practice in partnership with his wife and co-owner Yvonne. The couple and their staff of nearly 50 fills what had been an unmet need.

They provide services to clients from immigrant and refugee communities.

The mission is one handed down from both Sebastian and Yvonne's elders, they said.

Sebastian has a rich and deep family history of traditional healers familiar with herbal medicine and patient care in Uganda. For as long as he can remember, his father, a tailor and spiritual man, regularly spoke of the family's caregiving roots.

“He always reminded me that we have the gift of healing in our family,” Sebastian said. “We needed to listen to God on how he wanted us to pass on that (gift).”

Couple developed the practice while working other jobs

In the late 1980s, both Sebastian and Yvonne Ssempijja were working full time in Milwaukee, Yvonne as an accountant and Sebastian at what was then St. Aemelian-Lakeside, a community-based care clinic.

“We saw there was a gap,” Sebastian said, noting that he would get calls from the hospitals and neighboring psychiatric units needing providers who spoke different languages and understood the nuances of different cultural backgrounds.

For eight years, the Ssempijjas continued their jobs while developing a new practice seeing clients in the evening to accommodate their schedules. Sebastian would even visit families’ homes to check up on them.



In 1998, they left their other jobs and opened Sebastian Family Psychology Practice.

“(The) clinic is actively involved with all of the communities from which people come,” said Fred Coleman, a 20-year clinic partner and psychiatrist on the clinical faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Refugees, immigrants and other minority groups “know the clinic not as an office that you go to but as the place that Sebastian Family connects to their community.”

The clinic uses a model of healing that places a special emphasis on not just the biological and psychosocial elements of a client and their health, but also their culture, language and spiritual and economic background, Sebastian said.

The clinic “is as close as it could come to every one of these communities having their own mental health practice,” Coleman said.

The practice can provide services in up to 20 languages, with the hired staff speaking 13. The clinic hires translators and interpreters for the other seven.

“Being able to meet the client where they are, within their language, has brought us a lot of mileage and trust,” Sebastian added.

“It’s as close as it could come to every one of these communities having their own mental health practice in their community,” Coleman said about the clinic.

Sebastian's and Yvonne’s experience coming to Milwaukee from Uganda has informed that model.

“We may not have experienced the trauma or what they went through,” Yvonne Ssemipjja said about the clinic’s clientele. “But as an immigrant, we all have the same story. The story may have variations, but the story of an immigrant is almost the same.”

At the clinic, it is integral to approach community care for immigrants and refugees from both a local and global angle, said her husband, who goes by "Dr. Sebastian" to all his patients.

"They have a lot of needs and talents they bring to us," he continued. "To understand well, we also have to be aware of what is happening in their countries."



At a local level, the practice has longstanding ties and partnerships with city, county and state agencies, including Madison Public Schools, Milwaukee County's Behavioral Health Division and different refugee support organizations. Personal connections with spiritual leaders and cultural groups also are critical, Sebastian said.

"Knowing where (clients are) coming from in term of their cultural beliefs, practices — who they trust — becomes so crucial," he noted.

They teach the next generation of providers

The Ssmepijjas, who have four children, are involved in multiple other endeavors, from literacy campaigns to helping Ugandan grandmothers who have to raise children because their parents have died from AIDS.

Their long-term goal with the clinic is to destigmatize mental health while also training the next generation of culturally attuned mental health professionals.

"When we are ready to leave, who else is going to carry the torch? Who is going to continue providing services?" Yvonne said.

Working with the Medical College of Wisconsin, Marquette and other institutions, the Ssempijjas' clinic has sought to build a diverse "learning collective." And, again, it was the influence of an elder who gave them a mission.

Two days before Sebastian's father passed away in October 2011, he asked one thing of his son and daughter-in-law. Yvonne's dad had been saying much the same thing before his death.

"The work (you) do in America," Sebastian's father told them. "Do it for Africa."

With that inspiration, the clinic became involved with the Uganda Behavioral Health Alliance, a nonprofit established in 2009 that focuses on improving mental health visibility

and access in East Africa. Through work with the Alliance, the Ssempijjas, and collaborators such as Coleman, have trained more than 1,000 providers.

Sebastian underscored the important of preparing providers to have the training, and the cultural capacity, “to contribute to global healing.”

“Mental health is not just a local issue,” he added. “It’s a global issue.”

