

Macomb-OU Incubator company helps fight coronavirus pandemic

Refuge for Nations is providing personal protective equipment for local medical facilities, in partnership with the Industrial Sewing and Innovation Center (ISAIC) in Detroit.



Cynthia Khan (left), founder and CEO of Refuge for Nations, is pictured with an RFN employee at the Industrial Sewing and Innovation Center (ISAIC) in Detroit.

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In the midst of the coronavirus crisis, employees of a [Macomb-OU Incubator](#) client company are turning out hundreds of gowns, masks and face shields for hospital workers and others in need of personal protective equipment.

[Refuge for Nations](#) is a nonprofit organization that provides job skills, ESL classes, and other supportive services to refugee women in metro Detroit, from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds around the world. Their job training

focuses on one core skill – sewing. According to Founder and CEO Cynthia Khan, the emphasis on sewing is born largely out of cultural considerations.



Refuge for Nations employees are sewing personal protective equipment, in partnership with ISAIC, for local medical facilities.

“Most of these women already have sewing skills from when their mothers taught them in their home countries,” Khan said. “We help develop their skills by teaching them the American way of sewing.”

She added that in some cases cultural norms dictate the type of work environments deemed appropriate for women. The organization takes these factors into account while empowering women to succeed on the job. For most, it's their first time working outside the home.

Refuge for Nations was founded in 2017 and has locations in Dearborn and Clinton Township. In 2019, it joined the Macomb-OU Incubator, which promotes economic development throughout Southeast Michigan. John Swiatek, client strategist at the incubator, credits Refuge for Nations for supporting the region's health care needs at a critical time.

“We know that America is a refuge for nations, just like our name says, and we're so thankful for the opportunity to help others as we have been helped.”

-Cynthia Khan, founder and CEO of Refuge for Nations

“I think it's a testament to their value as a social enterprise,” Swiatek said. “Not only are they providing jobs for refugees, a population that faces significant barriers to employment, but they're also helping doctors, nurses and many others stay safe during the pandemic.”

Before the virus struck, employees filled orders for the company's main products, which include women's clothing, accessories and baby items. As the pandemic escalated, so did demand for personal protective equipment. Now, the company is working with the Industrial Sewing and Innovation Center (ISAIC) in Detroit to produce protective gowns for the Detroit Medical Center and other local medical facilities. Refuge for Nations also produces custom PPE, with screen-printed and embroidered logos, for various businesses and organizations.

While the pandemic has ravaged the broader economy, the increased demand for industrial sewing has changed the women's lives.

“When we started getting these orders, the women were so happy,” said Khan. “Their status in the family is elevated because they're generating income at a time when their husbands have been out of work because of the shutdown. They're just so

thankful to be of use to their country and community during this difficult time.”

The women work within their homes, at ISAIC in Detroit and at Refuge for Nations' sewing room in Clinton Township. They use industrial sewing machines to produce PPE, including 500 gowns a week in partnership with ISAIC.



Refuge for Nations employees produce 500 protective gowns a week in partnership with ISAIC.

“There are a lot of techniques the women have to learn to use the machines, but they are very quick learners,” Khan said. “Most of them have gone through the industrial sewing program at Wayne County Community College, and they also receive guidance from our volunteer sewing teachers.”

Employees are paid by the item, with most earning between \$350 and \$550 per week. Beyond financial incentives, the opportunity to make a better life and contribute to their adopted country motivates everyone who works with the organization.

“All these women – and especially myself, because I am an immigrant too – we all truly appreciate this country and what this country does for us,” Khan reflected. “We know that America is a refuge for nations, just like our name says, and we’re so thankful for the opportunity to help others as we have been helped.”