

Spotlight Report

ON PUTTING DOWN ROOTS IN LOWELL

Issue 15 | July 2026



A Message From the CEO

Lowell, Massachusetts, has long exemplified the promise of a “Gateway City.” By welcoming successive generations of immigrants and refugees, it has become an economic engine for the state and a place where cultures from across the world have mingled to create a community that is uniquely American. Immigrants helped put Lowell on the map by powering its famed role in the Industrial Revolution, and over the decades, newcomers have continued to help meet the city’s changing needs while shaping its character.

IINE’s own work began in Lowell in 1918, when a group of pioneering women at the local YWCA opened our doors to help a growing population of immigrant women and girls find their footing, integrate into the city’s workforce and civic life, and thrive in their new home. Over the past century, we’ve built on this model of welcoming and now serve thousands of newcomers every year.

As shifting federal priorities create uncertainty about our nation’s commitment to welcoming newcomers, IINE is making a bold investment in their future—right where our story began. This investment will bring our Lowell programs under one roof, creating a lasting, permanent home for opportunity, connection, and community.

Rooted in the historic Lower Highlands neighborhood, this dynamic community hub will enable us to respond to the evolving needs of immigrants, refugees, and the broader Lowell community for generations to come.



When we told other resettlement agencies in our coalition, who are all struggling to adjust to increasingly hostile federal policies, that we are investing in our own building—an immigrant services hub that will anchor our next century of service—they literally cheered. Everyone feels it. We can’t just be reactive. We need to envision and invest in a more welcoming future.”

– Bill Gillett, IINE Director of Public Policy & Advocacy

Surrounded by trusted partners and designed for growth, the new center will expand access to critical services, foster belonging, and serve as a launchpad for innovative programs that help newcomers build stable, prosperous lives.

This is a defining moment for investment in Massachusetts’ immigrant communities. While policies and priorities may change, the contributions of newcomers remain a constant source of strength and vitality for our state. In the face of uncertainty, we are choosing to lead with vision—creating new opportunities, forging stronger connections, and building a brighter future rooted in welcome, resilience, and belonging.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeff Thielman".

Jeffrey Thielman
President & CEO, IINE

100+ Years of Helping Immigrants to Shape Lowell



1910s

A NEW WAY TO WELCOME

Newcomers joining generations of Irish, French Canadian, Greek, and other immigrant workers who had powered Lowell's mills now fill its factories, maintaining the city's industrial economy.

1918 – The International Institute of Lowell (IIL) is founded as part of a movement led by women social workers from the YWCA advancing a new model: integration without forced assimilation.

IIL's founders establish programming that remains core to our work today: English classes, employment support, and immigration legal services.

1920s - 1940s

BUILDING STABILITY AND COMMUNITY

IIL helps hundreds of immigrants attain legal status, reunite with their families, put down roots, and strengthen Lowell's workforce during a period of economic transition.

In new ethnic neighborhoods, immigrants start small businesses, faith institutions, and mutual aid networks, shaping the city's civic and cultural life.

During wartime, immigrant workers sustain Lowell's textile and manufacturing output. IIL provides Red Cross training, citizenship services, and immigration legal support.

1924 – International Institute of Boston is founded.

1935 – IIL becomes independent of the YWCA to support men and non-Christians.

1948 – Passage of the Displaced Persons Act expands refugee resettlement, shaping IIL's work with postwar arrivals in Lowell.

1950s - 1980s

REVITALIZING A CHANGING CITY

As Lowell's textile industry declines, Cold War-era refugees help stabilize population loss and bring new life to struggling neighborhoods. Newcomers revitalize local business districts with new shops and services while introducing new cultural influences that expand Lowell's identity beyond its industrial roots.

1958 – IIL expands its services to support a wave of immigrants from Portugal, Cuba, and Puerto Rico.

1975 – The fall of Saigon and conflicts in Cambodia and Laos lead to a large wave of refugee resettlement in Lowell supported by IIL.

1980 – The Refugee Act establishes the modern U.S. resettlement system.

1986 – Angkor Dance Troupe is founded to preserve and elevate Cambodian cultural arts in Lowell.

100+ Years of Helping Immigrants to Shape Lowell (Cont.)



1990s - 2010s

FUELING GROWTH AND VISIBILITY

In response to new global conflicts, IIL helps Lowell welcome refugees from the Balkans, Central America, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, and Iraq. Lowell's diversity increasingly shapes its public identity through events like the Lowell Folk Festival, which draws tens of thousands of visitors each year.

1990 - Lowell Folk Festival is launched, celebrating global cultures across the city.

2000 - Lowell African Cultural Festival is launched.

2011 - The International Institutes of Lowell, Boston, and Manchester unite to form the International Institute of New England.

2018 - [Lowell 100](#) honors supporters of refugees and immigrants, celebrating a century of welcome.

2020 - 2026

NAVIGATING THROUGH CRISIS

As "essential workers" in healthcare, food service and more, immigrants help Lowell survive the COVID-19 pandemic. Multiple and sudden displacement crises bring a large influx of refugees to New England.

2021 - Afghan evacuation brings thousands who supported the U.S. abroad to join Lowell's strong Afghan community.

2022 - War in Ukraine and increased migration from Haiti bring thousands to Lowell.

2023 - IINE launches an emergency shelter program to address urgent housing needs.

2025 - IINE responds to federal policy changes with Know Your Rights and family preparedness trainings and food delivery.

2026 - IINE joins legal action to protect refugees affected by Operation PARRIS.

2026 - IINE launches a new future of immigrant support in Lowell, with the purchase of 585 Middlesex St.

A New Home in Lowell: Expanded Capacity and Stronger Community

IINE's new 21,000-square-foot facility at 585 Middlesex Street brings all of our Lowell staff together in one location. It includes significantly expanded space for services, programs, and community partnerships. Highlights include:

- Dedicated youth space for our mentoring and tutoring programs
- Three classrooms for English classes and workforce training
- More client meeting space for legal services and case management
- Space to host monthly convenings with community partners like advocacy groups and immigrant services coalitions
- Shared space with the African Community Center
- Improved parking and access for food distribution, appointments, and events

The new space also allows for two exciting new additions:

- **On-site Food Pantry:** 585 Middlesex includes dedicated space for Open Pantry Lowell, a long-running, independent nonprofit food pantry serving Lowell and surrounding communities.
- **“Thrift Store” Donation Room:** With increased storage space, IINE will create a new model for distributing donations. A mock “thrift shop” will provide some clients with skills training in retail while giving others access to free clothing and homewares.



Discover the Lowell Highlands Neighborhood



IINE's new home at 585 Middlesex is located in a historic residential neighborhood near the Chelmsford border.

Community Connections

The building is within walking distance of key community partners like the Lowell Community Health Center, UMass Lowell, and the Boys & Girls Club, as well as service providers like the Department of Transitional Assistance and amenities like Roberto Clemente Park.

Transit Hub

It offers direct access to local bus routes, the commuter rail, and the Lowell Connector.

Cultural Center

The neighborhood is close to "Cambodia Town," a vibrant district receiving ongoing city investment and development.

"We're excited to begin a new chapter in our rich history in Lowell by making this deep commitment to the city's immigrants, and to be embedding ourselves in an immigrant community in which the City of Lowell is investing. A 'thrift store' donation room and a food pantry are the first of many new initiatives that this space will make possible."

-Caroline Rowe, Lowell Managing Director

LOWELL IN 2025

6,509 Refugee and immigrants served

334 Local employers hired IINE immigrant clients

4,400 Hours of support provided by community volunteers

Get Involved

Donate 

Give to support programming and services for immigrants.

Visit 

Email SVP Xan Weber to visit 585 Middlesex in person!

Volunteer 

Help immigrants adjust to life in the U.S. as a volunteer.

Give Goods 

Stock our new donation room with clothing, furniture, and more.