

# Employee Spotlight: Vien Taliana



## **Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?**

I was born and raised in Saigon, Vietnam. After the war, my family faced many challenges. My father, Vinh Vu, served with U.S. troops fighting the communists of North Vietnam. Knowing we would have to leave Saigon after the U.S. withdrew, my father decided in 1980 to go ahead of the family and pave the way for us. He was one of the "boat people," enduring a refugee camp in Malaysia for a couple of years before finally making it to Michigan in 1982.

It took ten years for our family to reunite. During those years, my mother made numerous attempts to leave the war-torn

country, some of which were dangerous and harrowing. One time, our boat was caught by local police, and they started shooting. I was just a child, and I remember the older people piling on top of me to protect me. We lost several family members who went missing, and we don't know if they were killed or lost at sea.

Finally, in 1990, we were reunited in Kent County, Michigan. I was 19 years old and spoke very little English, but I was determined to succeed. I attended adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for six months, then enrolled in college. I completed my BSN at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. I have been a nurse for over 25 years, and this is my 22nd year at the Kent County Health Department.

## **What is your position at Kent County and what individuals do you work with?**

At the Health Department, I worked for 19 years in clinics providing immunizations and WIC for low-income clients, most of those years at the South Clinic where I enjoyed working with a very diverse population. Being fluent in Vietnamese was very helpful in serving the Vietnamese community in the Kentwood area. I also worked nearly 2 years in Children's Special Health Care Services, providing health insurance coverage for 0–21-year-old clients with special needs.

Currently, I work in the Refugee Program, conducting health screenings and vaccinating new arrivals in Kent County. This role is very close to my heart, as it allows me to connect with individuals who, like my family, were forced to leave their countries to escape war, persecution, or natural disasters. As a former

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refugee, I understand the struggles and challenges they face. I strive to make a difference in their lives by making them feel welcome and helping them navigate the complex health care system in the U.S.

### **What are two or three things that staff should know about your role?**

As part of the Refugee Team, we provide health screenings for new arrivals at the Annex Building. A few days before seeing them in the clinic, I conduct home visits to complete their health history and help them prepare for their screenings. During these visits, I educate our clients about the basics of the U.S. healthcare system, health insurance (Medicaid vs private insurance), when to call 911 vs going to urgent care, and how to utilize their Primary Care Physician (PCP). We also cover important topics like handwashing to prevent illness, dental hygiene, healthy nutrition, and vaccinations.

On the day of their health screening at the clinic, our team checks their vital signs, height/weight, performs blood tests for TB and iron, and screens for pregnancy, diabetes, and kidney disease. We also check their teeth, hearing, vision, and provide vaccinations.

After the screening, I send a medical summary with recommendations to their PCP for further testing during their first 90 days in the U.S.

I also collaborate with Bethany and Samaritas Resettlement Agencies to ensure that new arrivals receive their health screenings and follow-up care at KCHD and with their PCP. Additionally, I refer them to other services like MIHP, NFP, WIC, Immunizations, dental, vision, and mental health services.

### **What is the most rewarding part of your job? What is the most challenging?**

The most rewarding part of my job is seeing the impact we have on our clients' lives. When our clients leave the clinic with a smile, a hug, or words of gratitude like "thank you" or "good job," I know that we are making a difference. The work I do not only affects individuals but also strengthens the entire community, as we are all connected in one way or another.

The most challenging aspect is hearing the traumatic stories of our clients, many of whom have been victims of torture and suffer from PTSD. My heart aches when hearing their stories, and I actively listen to ensure they know they are being heard. It is natural for me to be empathetic to their pain and suffering, but these feelings can stick with me for a while and result in compassion stress. I have taken classes to help me identify my limits, set boundaries, practice coping skills, and seek support to prevent burnout.

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## **Do you have any interesting/fun stories about your experience working with clients, employees or partners in the community?**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, shortly after the CDC authorized the COVID vaccine for emergency use, I was working with the Mobile Vaccine Clinic, providing services to 100 senior residents at low-income housing near Franklin Ave. These seniors lined up to receive their vaccine, and I remember one gentleman who was very concerned about getting the shot. He asked if I had ever given the COVID vaccine before, and when I said yes, he still wasn't convinced. He asked me to remove my mask so he could see my whole face. I did, and reassured him that I had worked in the immunization clinics for many years at KCHD. He looked puzzled and said, "You look too young to be doing this," and decided to wait for another nurse to give him the shot. It was a light-hearted moment in a very serious time.

## **Is there anything else you want to say/talk about?**

I would like to express my gratitude to those who have had a great impact on my life and nursing career. First, I thank God for His blessings that brought my family here safely. I am also grateful to my parents for their sacrifices and for raising me in the Christian faith, which has guided me through many challenges. Their support allowed me to fulfill my lifelong dream of becoming a nurse. Lastly, I am thankful for the opportunity to work with such incredible leaders, Joann Hoganson and John West, and the amazing Refugee Team at KCHD.

