

RUSA LGBTQ+

2023 Annual Report



RUSA LGBTQ+

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Foreword

NEVER IN A MILLION YEARS DID I IMAGINE THAT RUSA LGBTQ+ WOULD EVENTUALLY BECOME A FORMALLY REGISTERED NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION.

After nearly 16 years of community building, we eventually came of age in 2022 when we registered as a nonprofit. As I present our first annual report, I would like to focus on the many accomplishments of 2023.

Our first full year as a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization was filled with milestones: receiving our first seed funding, establishing a board and solidifying our strategic directions, hiring our first paid staff, launching an active chat channel with nearly a thousand users, organizing our seventh and the largest Brighton Beach Pride concluded with a fantastic afterparty featuring our community talent. We also launched Rainbow Connections, a one-to-one program that pairs volunteers with newcomers for English practice, companionship, and orientation to the US.

Amidst the many challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community, including the imposition of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in Russia, the labeling of the "global LGBTQ movement" as extremist, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, regional conflicts, New York City asylum seeker shelter emergencies, and a lack of legal and social services in New York City, RUSA LGBTQ+ is working tirelessly to support its rapidly expanding community.

In 2023, more than 2,000 new asylum seekers participated in RUSA's Pride marches, events, and moderated chat channels. Over 800 people received direct support through RUSA's referrals, legal assistance, and job and housing orientations. RUSA reached and assisted more than 3,000 persons via educational publications, social media, and newsletters. In 2023, RUSA has welcomed the largest number of asylum seekers since our founding in 2008. To meet the challenge of helping more LGBTQ+ individuals, families with children, and youth, we at RUSA LGBTQ+ focus on building our organizational capacity.

As RUSA LGBTQ+ grows, my hope is that our grassroots organization will keep strengthening the community of LGBTQ+ refugees from the Eurasian region and further amplify our collective voice to demand equality and human rights for everyone.

Yelena Goltsman

RUSA LGBTQ+ Founder and Board President

Mission

RUSA LGBTQ+, headquartered in New York City, is a community-based, nonprofit organization of Eurasian LGBTQ+ immigrants, women, and other people with intersectional identities and their allies. In solidarity with other grassroots groups, RUSA builds the power of people to change unjust policies, discriminatory societal attitudes, and oppressive ideologies to create a more equitable world.

RUSA LGBTQ+ was formed as a grassroots group in 2008, and registered as a nonprofit organization in 2022. RUSA provides informational support and mutual aid to asylum seekers and other immigrants in the United States and organizes events to build a stronger community of LGBTQ+ immigrants and allies and increase the acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQ+ people worldwide.

Vision

Our vision is a world where the Eurasian LGBTQ+ immigrant community is an integral and active part of social justice and human rights movements in the United States and globally, whose common goal is a world where people of all races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender identities, and abilities exercise their human rights fully, openly, and safely, without fear, violence, bigotry, or discrimination.



Values

The values and keywords driving our work are: gender justice, transparency, belonging, chosen family, joy, civic engagement, human rights, immigrant justice, racial justice, and solidarity.

We also endorse anti-imperialism, celebrating differences, diversity, inclusion, mutual support, and volunteer engagement. We strive towards disability justice, equity, liberation, mobilization, cultural humility, participation, and pride.

Strategic Goals

Our strategic goal is community building and strengthening. Through community events, mutual aid, referrals, and orientations, we build a community of Eurasian LGBTQ+ immigrants. We unite against structural and interpersonal discrimination of LGBTQ+ individuals, women, refugees, and other underprivileged groups.

As a new nonprofit, RUSA also focuses on its capacity building and sustainability. We increase RUSA's knowledge and skills to support our community, deliver RUSA's mission, and ensure a stable, long-term, impactful, and effective organization.



Programs

Through various activities, we work towards building a more robust support system, a stronger community, and more effective advocacy for the rights of LGBTQ+ immigrants.

During 2022-2023, the number of Eurasian asylum seekers in the USA has increased exponentially. LGBTQ+ people from Russia and other post-Soviet countries seek asylum because everyone expressing LGBTQ+ identity—transgender people especially—in these countries have been oppressed through ongoing waves of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. After the start of the Russian government's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, their persecution greatly intensified. In 2023, the Russian government both banned transgender medical care and designated the entire "international LGBTQ movement [to be] 'extremist.'"

Community events

Regular in-person community meetings and events provide a safe space to build a sense of belonging, make friends, receive support, and learn. We serve refreshments and distribute necessities like clothing and personal hygiene items. Guest speakers from nonprofit and public agencies join to present their services.

We see an average of 25-30 new participants join each month, and our events have an attendance ranging from 15 to upwards of 200 people. Our annual Brighton Beach Pride attracts hundreds of participants.

Our social outings and art programs foster community engagement and provide opportunities for LGBTQ+ immigrants to connect and express themselves creatively, promoting social integration and overall well-being. Our community members- musicians, singers, painters, and drag artists - perform and present at the Brighton Beach Pride, World Refugee Day, and other events around the city.

In 2023, we organized 47 events, mostly in person. These included seven advocacy and community organizing events, ten health and well-being events, seven information sessions, 20 social and cultural gatherings and programs, three volunteer trainings, and one winter coat distribution event.

Community Impact

"…thank you very much for your precious work because you don't just do it, but you put your soul and heart into it, and there are very few such people. When I first came to the meeting, I felt we had all known each other for a long time, and I had never felt so at ease. This is not just useful; it helps people live a full life and accept themselves as they are, especially in countries where we are not considered human." Sabina













Community Impact

"To a ship that has lost its bearings in turbulent seas, a lighthouse is a vital necessity. For forced migrants in our community and beyond, RUSA LGBTQ in the USA serves as such a beacon. I am deeply grateful to my fate for the opportunity to know you. And I bow before your dedication to helping members of our community. You do tremendous work. You provide material, moral, and documentary assistance to everybody in need. I have met some wonderful people. I consider it an honor to walk hand in hand with you through life. Hugs."
Arsen Sattar Abeu

Rainbow Connections

The Rainbow Connections program started in November 2023. It offers one-to-one pairing between local volunteers and LGBTQ+ newcomers for English language practice and orientation to the US.

40 active Rainbow Connections pairs are meeting in six-month cycles. We are working to expand this program further by recruiting more volunteers.

The program is based on the previous iteration of a similar program, which ran from 2015-2017 in partnership with Congregation Beit Simcha Torah (CBST), Welcoming the Stranger. Several volunteers who participated in this program returned and now volunteer in Rainbow Connections, demonstrating long-term volunteer dedication and the program's success.

Health and wellbeing programs

Health services navigation

In 2023, in partnership with NYU Langone and our volunteer LGBTQ+ healthcare navigator, who is now our newest board member, we handled over 500 health-related cases, assisting with health insurance enrollment, making medical appointments, obtaining emergency medications and treatments, and finding culturally appropriate health and mental healthcare.

Peer support groups

To counter a lack of bilingual mental health services, we organize and facilitate peer support groups where LGBTQ+ immigrants can connect in their own language. These groups provide a supportive environment for discussing challenges, seeking advice, and receiving emotional support from volunteer facilitators who are immigrants themselves with backgrounds in case management, psychology, and art therapy. In 2023, two groups, a mental health support group and a peer support group for transgender people, met regularly.

Case management, referrals, and accompaniments

We address health, safety, food, and clothing issues, ensuring individuals receive the necessary support and resources. Led by coordinators and a team of volunteers, RUSA has advocated for the rights and well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals residing in shelters and neighborhoods.

We refer our community members to trusted social and healthcare services and English classes, providing accompaniments and interpretation. In 2023, we assisted over 1000 LGBTQ+ immigrants in accessing social and other services such as NYC HRA (Human Resources Administration) and HASA (HIV/AIDS Services Administration), and also IDNYC, banks, and legal services by providing personal accompaniment, interpretation, and personalized referrals.

We moderate an online chat channel with over 1000 people where we share resources, exchange advice, and answer questions.



Information guides

We have created and are constantly updating an extensive information guide for our community members and volunteers on the immigration process, housing, public benefits, English classes, higher education, and career resources, among other information requested by the community. We also collect information and feedback from our partners and the community on improving the guides.

Community Impact:

"After recently moving from Russia, it was imperative for me to find a community in which I could benefit people who were not accepted in their former countries. Here, I found friendly organizers and volunteers with whom it was interesting to talk to and feel involved in the meetings. After living in a country where it is tough and problematic to find such communities, I am very pleased to see open people and meetings on topics that, it seems, concern most newcomers!" Daria

My husband and I express immense gratitude for all that you do for our community! We are delighted to be part of your team and to help just as you have helped us! When my husband and I were living in our first shelter, and we encountered a problem with staying there (it became unsafe), we contacted all organizations for assistance as we were completely new here and didn't know anything. RUSA not only helped us navigate where to go and whom to turn to for help but also didn't leave us out on the streets, quite literally. You guys are doing tremendous work, the entire RUSA LGBT+ team. You are always there in difficult times.The support you provide and the meetings you conduct are very important and necessary for many!"
Alexander Grigoriev

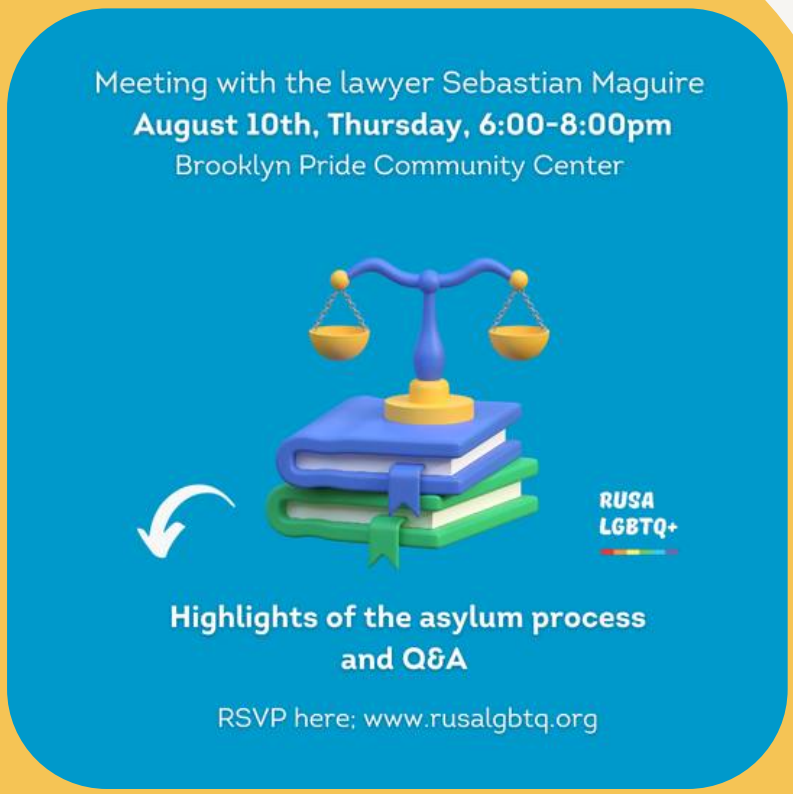
Emergency cash assistance and other mutual aid

We coordinated emergency cash assistance and other mutual aid to LGBTQ+ immigrants who faced hardship. We raised these funds from other immigrants in the community, allies, and supporters. We collected and distributed over $10,000 in 2023. We also conducted clothing and household item drives. Last year, we partnered with the First Presbyterian Church for a coat distribution event. Additionally, we partnered with Ruth's Refuge, that delivers new furniture to people who move from shelters into apartments.



Legal assistance

In partnership with RIF Asylum Support and SAFE Asylum, we provided legal orientation and assistance to LGBTQ+ immigrants. RUSA community participates in weekly RIF Asylum Support group legal consultations.
A joint pro se asylum clinic with SAFE Asylum started in the fall of 2023 at the Brooklyn Community Pride Center. At this pro bono clinic our trained volunteers help fill out the asylum applications and other immigration forms under the supervision of SAFE Asylum attorneys. In 2023, we assisted with over 100 asylum cases.



Advocacy

We advocate for our population through mass media appearances, commentary, and partnership building and join organizations and coalitions to better advocate for immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, LGBTQ+ populations, low-income families, and other New Yorkers. We participate in NYC Pride, NYC borough Prides, and immigrant and LGBTQ providers' coalitions and networks. In 2023, RUSA LGBTQ+ was featured in at least 20 TV programs, newspapers, and online mass media.

We meet with local elected officials to work together on better supporting LGBTQ+ immigrants.



Community Impact

I want to share my experience volunteering in the organization RUSA LGBTQ+, which organizes meetings and events for LGBTQ+ people in New York. I volunteered in this organization for about two months, helping with the organization and conducting various events such as educational seminars, psychological groups, and gay parades. I was impressed by the professionalism and enthusiasm of the volunteers who faced discrimination, violence, and persecution from authorities and society. The organization helps LGBT+ people who need support and consultation." Rashid

Brighton Beach Pride

RUSA LGBTQ+ organizes the annual Brighton Beach Pride. Brighton Beach Pride is our flagship community and advocacy event. This celebration of LGBTQ+ identity and diversity brings the community together, raises awareness, and promotes inclusivity, especially in southern Brooklyn.







Gay City News and several local bloggers and outlets covered the event.

In 2023, the 7th Brighton Beach Pride was one of the biggest yet, with a thousand people attending. A prominent journalist Masha Gessen of CUNY and the New Yorker, Iman La Caire of TransAsylias, Sashko Krapivkin, a Ukrainian activist and actor, and LGBTQ activist Ann Northrop, a representative of Governor Hochul office all speaking in support of LGBTQ+ refugees. This year, we also had the largest pride afterparty at the historic Coney Island USA building, featuring our community talent, including drag performances, dancing, singing, and instrumental live music.











Gay City News, May 22, 2023

The way Brighton Beach Pride started was that there was an influx of LGBTQ refugees from Russia after the first round of anti-gay laws was passed in Russia, and a lot of them landed here in Brighton Beach and encountered a lot of homophobia and transphobia," Masha Gessen, a prominent trans, and non-binary Russian journalist, told Gay City News. Gessen — who delivered remarks to the crowd in Russian — was referring to Russia's notorious 2013 anti-LGBTQ law that erased queer people from public life and led to widespread crackdowns on members of the community. The Russian government's treatment of LGBTQ people has only grown harsher during the war.

Community Impact:

My dear RUSA, I want to sincerely thank you for being there for me and our community and for your reliability, kindness, and warmth. Thank you for always being there! I am grateful to RUSA for everything that this team of kind and compassionate people does for everyone who needs help: informative, emotional, supportive, and bringing us all together! I have found many wonderful people and friends within the community who will always help in anxious and difficult times! I am doubly delighted and proud that such responsive, generous-hearted, and caring people exist in the world! However strong we may be, support increases our strength! It's like a breath of fresh air when difficulties pile up and make it hard to breathe! Thank you for the support! I will always be happy to repay the same!" Irina Knyazeva

Capacity Building

Volunteer Engagement

In 2023, we streamlined our volunteer engagement efforts by supporting several volunteer groups. We conducted volunteer orientations for Rainbow Connections volunteers, and asylum application volunteer training in partnership with SAFE Asylum.

RUSA LGBTQ+ has a core volunteer group of asylum seekers and first- and second-generation immigrants who support events, assist in the legal clinic, and moderate chat channels. We created task groups for the Brighton Beach Pride project, Boston and Fort Lauderdale support groups, mutual aid, and in-person event support.

Over 1000 volunteer hours, with 20 hours a week on average, in 2023 helped us to run our programs. With the new Rainbow Connections, the number of volunteer hours is increasing exponentially, with each volunteer giving at least two hours a week.

Board

RUSA LGBTQ+ has a seven-person board. All board members volunteer and provide day-to-day support by representing RUSA, welcoming newcomers, assisting with partnership building and communication strategy, and ensuring the organization stays focused on its mission. The board members are all immigrants and refugees from various countries, and most have been long-term RUSA LGBTQ+ community members and volunteers.

Community Impact

We want to express immense gratitude to you from our family! Personally, RUSA helped our family with money when we really needed it, and also provided school supplies for our son. In the fall, RUSA gave our whole family gift cards, with which we purchased winter jackets. For this, we say a warm thank you to RUSA every frosty day! Also, RUSA organizes and conducts weekly meetings with lawyers, during which we receive much useful information. Many thanks to RUSA for organizing individual English practice with volunteers! The RUSa team provided us with contacts of very good psychologists and accountants), and organized girls' nights out. This greatly helps to get to know each other, find new friends, and expand our circle of acquaintances, which is very important in a new city and in a new country."
Asel, Zulfia, and son.

"RUSA LGBTQ+ is a reliable LGBTQ+ community in the USA for me. They not only helped me settle into a new country but also regularly held meetings where current issues for LGBTQ+ immigrants are discussed. In a difficult moment, they provided me and my husband with help by providing us with a necessary laptop. I always know that I can turn to them for support. And I am not alone in this - I know many people for whom RUSA LGBTQ+ is not just an empty phrase but a real community ready to help on the path to a better life." Anatoly and Vladislav

Internal policies and procedures

We are creating various policies and procedures. We created a RUSA community agreement for all our community members and volunteers, which spells out the principles of our work, general rules, and sanctions to create and maintain a safe space for everyone.

In December 2023, RUSA LGBTQ+ relaunched its website.

Staffing and space

Our two paid part-time coordinators and acting executive director managed all the above activities and over 100 volunteers. All our activities together provide wraparound support for LGBTQ+ immigrants to build a stronger community for better community strengthening, support, and advocacy. Thus, we plan to garner more support to increase salaried hours for three staff members, provide small stipends for core volunteer leaders, and meet essential communication, administration, and event expenses. We are searching for free or low-cost office space as well.

In 2023, the Brooklyn Community Pride Center, Pier57, Coney Island USA, and the NYC Pride donated the meeting spaces.



Financial Overview

In 2023, the total cash expenses were $85,000. We spent 60% of this on personnel. We hired two part-time coordinators in 2023. Other board members and core volunteers contributed substantial time and expertise in-kind.

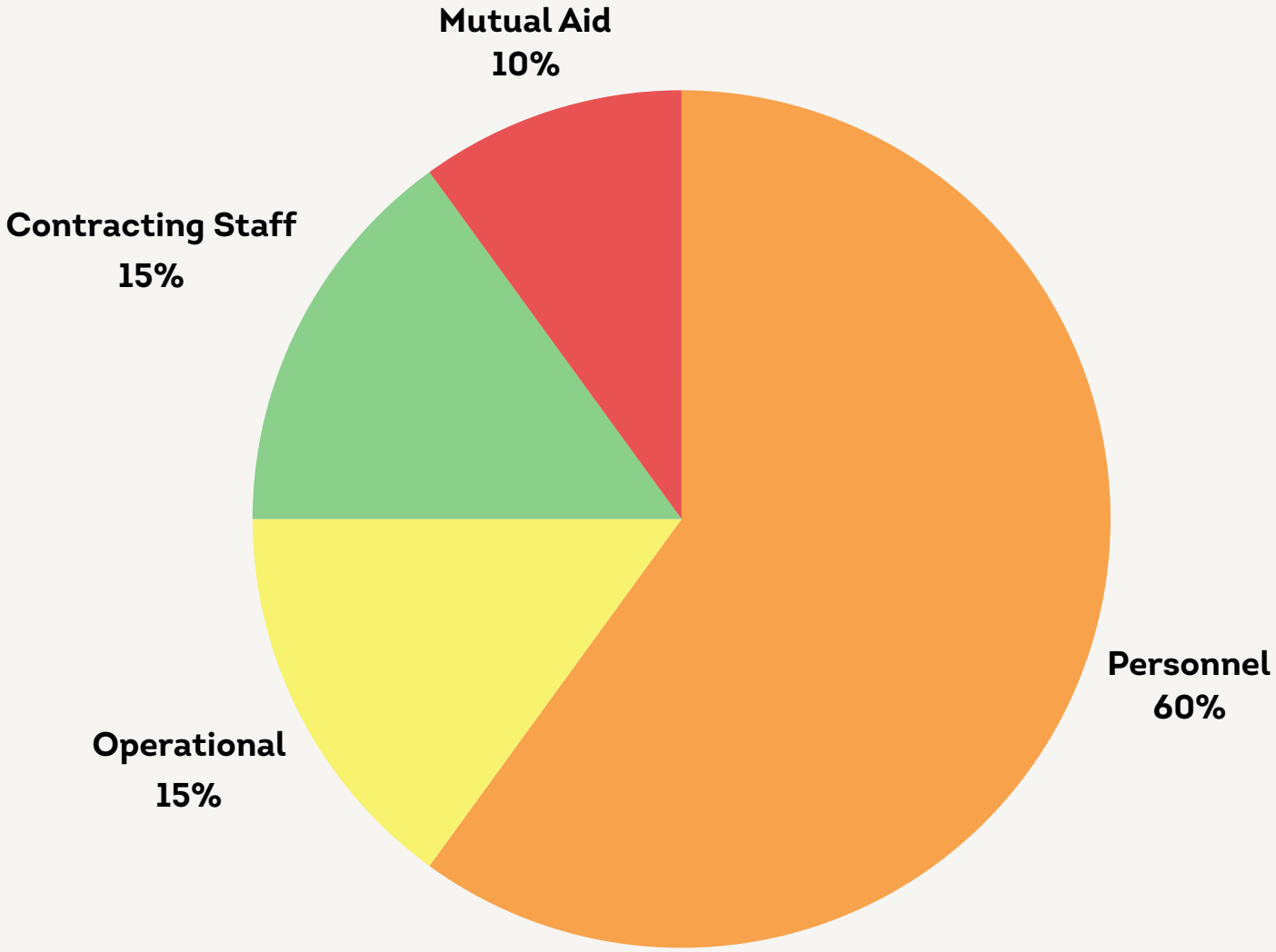
Our operational expenses were 15% of our budget, which included food for community events, printing, website and communication tools subscriptions, and membership fees.

We also engaged professionals for short-term projects and support, spending 15% on independent contracts.

We distributed mutual aid in cash and computers, household items, clothes, and hygiene items (10% of our budget) to our community members who experienced financial and health hardship.

In 2023, RUSA LGBTQ+ received its first funding from individual donations and private foundations, which RUSA had earmarked for two years.

Private foundations 2023-2024: $131,300
Individual donations 2023: $10,000
In-kind contributions: over $50,000 in donated time, space, and goods.



Our Leadership

Yelena Goltsman, she/her, Founder and Board President, a Soviet-Jewish refugee from Ukraine
Ezra Abdullabekov, he/him, Board Vice President, an asylee from Dagestan, Russia
Tanzilya Saleemjan Oren, she/her, Treasurer, an immigrant from Uzbekistan
Dante Matero, he/him, Board Secretary, a third-generation immigrant
Lieb Fischbach, he/him/they/them, Board Member, an asylee from Russia
Lyosha Gorshkov, Board Member, an asylee from Russia
Nina Zaretsky, she/her, outgoing Board Member, a refugee from Belarus
Alexandr Trifonov, he/him, incoming Board Member, an immigrant from Uzbekistan
Olga Mamaeva, she/her, Coordinator, an immigrant from Russia
Maxim Ibadov, they/them/fab, Coordinator, US-born, Russia-raised immigrant



Future Work

RUSA LGBTQ+ is rapidly developing as a newly registered nonprofit. We are working on strengthening our community to have a more powerful voice at the policy level. Specifically, we intend to regularly participate in legislative advocacy alongside our colleagues at the New York Immigration Coalition, New Pride Agenda, and other organizations to fight for the rights of asylum seekers, LGBTQ+ immigrants, and all other underprivileged groups in New York City and worldwide.

Through engagement in outreach and specialized training, we will continue to expand the number of volunteers involved. We aim to increase our capacity to connect more community members with volunteers in Rainbow Connections. Furthermore, we will continue developing internal policies and procedures, particularly regarding our communication strategy and policies. We will build an advisory committee to assist RUSA with external partnerships and fundraising.

RUSA plans to expand our programming around workforce development, mental health support, and innovative community building. We will work to improve our fundraising capacity, as well as our messaging and communication.



Supporter Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our funders:

MARIAM ASSEFA FUND

AYCO CHARITABLE FOUNDATION

Statue Foundation Inc

NYU Grossman School of Medicine

WSCF

West Side Community Fund

NYC PRIDE

RUSA LGBTQ+ is extremely grateful for in-kind donations of meeting space, supplies, clothes, furniture, and services by:

Brooklyn Community Pride Center

SAFE Asylum

NYU Langone Health

RIF Asylum Support

Materials for the Arts | New York City Department of Cultural Affairs

Beit Simchat Torah Congregation

The Ark Clinic at CBST

The First Presbyterian Church of New York City

RIVERSIDE Immigrant Services & Empowerement

Riverside Immigrant Services & Empowerement

Coney Island USA Presents

Coney Island USA

Ruth's Refuge

A special thank you goes to our individual donors, especially our community members!

Our dedicated volunteers are at the core of all that we do!

- Rainbow Connections volunteers
- Brighton Beach Pride volunteers
- Weekly events volunteers, speakers, and support groups' facilitators

Thank you!

Support us today



rusalgbtq.org/donate



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