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Contact: BFU Media Team
press@blackforeignersinukraine.org

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'Black Foreigners in Ukraine' Helps Refugees Access Mental Health Services

The global collective of volunteers runs a mental health support Telegram channel for young Black and African students who have fled the war in Ukraine

[Black Foreigners in Ukraine \(BFU\)](#) – a group of global volunteers who have successfully helped hundreds of Black, African and other marginalized foreigners and students escape Ukraine – now turns its attention to providing mental health support to combat the PTSD and trauma of surviving war. Like life, war is in constant flux with ever shifting grounds and terrain. With so many Black and African students safely out of Ukraine, BFU is responding to the needs of the communities it serves by helping students and refugees access free mental health resources.

“For BFU, the initial focus when the war broke out was to help people get to safety, and away from bombs and bullets,” said [Ephraim "Phoenix" Osinboyejo](#) who co-led logistical operations to navigate students and refugees to safer border points and transport in Ukraine. “Then arose the need to create global awareness for widespread cases of at-risk groups of people of colour being discriminated against whilst trying to flee war.”

Posts on social media and news stories confirmed that marginalized migrant communities – but especially Black and African communities – were forced to endure crippling and violent fear tactics, psychological torment and long wait times at border crossings in freezing weather. Others, unable to flee, had to stay put in bomb shelters within city limits often without electricity, supplies, food, water, heat, and sometimes with no means of communication.

“Speaking to a few students confirmed what was already very clear. People were dangerously tethering on the edge of mental breakdowns,” shared Osinboyejo. “So I did the first thing that came to mind – I made a call for help.”

“[Black Foreigners in Ukraine](#) and [I put out a tweet](#) asking for mental health professionals willing to offer over-the-phone support to students and other at-risk persons, and it slowly gained momentum,” continued Osinboyejo. A US-based physician, [Dr. Kemi Babagbemi](#), who is a scholar on health disparities and equity, took up the charge to coordinate putting a group of trauma-informed mental health professionals together.

“Posts on social media and news stories confirmed that already marginalized immigrant communities – especially Black and African communities – were forced to endure crippling and

violent fear tactics, unnecessary delays, psychological torment, and outright racism as they tried to flee the war,” said Dr. Babagbemi.

“I am not a mental health professional but it was hard to be a bystander when there was clear evidence of suffering and a real need for mental health assistance. I have the privilege of access to the medical community and I chose to use it – understanding that what we were doing was only for the emergency situation and that the trauma unique to the experience of African communities and other people of color during this war will likely have a long-lasting impact, and will need to be addressed for a long time to come.”

Dr. Babagbemi reached out to mental health practitioners in her community and the response was inspiring. The [Telegram channel](#) started with about 7 volunteers in the first 2 days. Now the group includes 120+ individuals both seeking and offering mental health support – and is growing every day. In the coming days, Dr. Babagbemi will hold a community space for the first responders who are experiencing the secondary trauma associated with war and supporting marginalized communities of color who are relocating outside of Ukraine.

Osinboyejo states, “I’m not a mental health professional. I got involved in rescue and relief work to help people get to safety. I’ve since come together with others to start BFU to combine and amplify efforts. It’s been very helpful and heartwarming to have others help coordinate and manage the processes of bringing help to persons in need of mental health support at such a trying time.”

Black Foreigners in Ukraine (BFU) supports individuals by providing funds for transportation, connecting people to on-the-ground volunteer escape vehicles, transferring crypto funds for food and temporary housing, connecting people to mental health support and working to create partnerships with universities so that students may continue their studies upon leaving Ukraine. Learn more about BFU and its work to support Black and African refugees at blackforeignersinukraine.org.

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