



**Cultivating Community:**  
**Rhetorical Practices of Migrant Volunteers in Chicago**

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### **About the DePaul Migration Collaborative**

The DePaul Migration Collaborative (DMC) is born from DePaul University's commitment to immigrant communities. In 1996, the College of Law founded its nationally recognized Asylum & Immigration Law Clinic. In 2015, the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences introduced the first U.S. graduate program in Refugee & Forced Migration Studies. The DMC, a joint venture of the College of Law and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, embodies DePaul's continued dedication to interdisciplinary research and advocacy in migration and human rights, seeking systemic change through education and collective action, reinforcing DePaul's legacy as an immigrant-serving institution.

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## About the Researcher, Mónica Reyes

Mónica Reyes is an Assistant Professor in the Writing, Rhetoric & Discourse program at DePaul University. Her research examines migration rhetorics, cultural rhetorics, and community-based literacy practices, with particular attention to how displaced communities navigate systems of visibility, care, and belonging. She is the author of *Rhetoric and Storytelling within the U.S. Asylum Process: Shelter Rhetorics* (Routledge, 2024) and has published scholarship on migration, refugee advocacy, and community-engaged pedagogy.

Her work emphasizes collaborative and community-centered research methods that value lived experience and relational accountability. Through both teaching and research, she has worked alongside community organizations to document how marginalized communities create systems of mutual aid, dignity, and collective care.

## About Nuevos Vecinos

Nuevos Vecinos (NV) is a mutual aid organization in Chicago's Uptown that originally supported recently arrived migrants through the distribution of clothing, household items, winter gear, and other essential resources. Since the arrival of thousands of migrants to Chicago beginning in 2022, NV has become an important community resource for families navigating housing instability, employment transitions, and the challenges of adapting to a new city. In addition to providing material support, the organization creates opportunities for migrants to volunteer, build relationships, and participate in community leadership.

This partnership was selected because Nuevos Vecinos represents a powerful example of grassroots community response during a period of rapid migration to Chicago. The organization's emphasis on dignity, reciprocity, and volunteer leadership aligned closely with the goals of this research project, which sought to understand how migrants experience and communicate care, belonging, and visibility through everyday practices of mutual aid.

## Introduction

Beginning in 2022, Chicago experienced a significant increase in the arrival of migrants transported from the southern border through state-sponsored relocation initiatives. Many newly arrived migrants entered the city with limited access to clothing, transportation, employment resources, and stable housing. Public discussions often framed migrants through narratives of crisis, burden, or emergency response, while less attention was given to the everyday experiences and rhetorical practices through which migrants rebuilt community and care networks.

This project, "Cultivating Community: Rhetorical Practices of Migrant Volunteers in Chicago," explored how migrants participating in mutual aid work at Nuevos Vecinos used acts of clothing distribution, volunteering, and community participation to construct dignity, belonging, and collective support. Rather than focusing solely on institutional responses to migration, the project

centered the experiences and perspectives of migrant volunteers themselves. Nuevos Vecinos was selected because of its longstanding work with newly arrived migrants and because the organization provided an important site for understanding how mutual aid functions not only as material support, but also as a form of emotional and communal repair.

## Methodology

This project used a qualitative, community-engaged research methodology grounded in semi-structured interviews and inductive analysis. Between Spring and Fall 2025, interviews were conducted with 15 migrant volunteers affiliated with Nuevos Vecinos. Participants were adults over the age of 18 who had arrived in Chicago after 2022 and had participated in volunteer efforts through the organization.

Interviews lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and focused on participants' experiences with migration, clothing access, volunteering, emotional wellbeing, and community belonging. Interviews were conducted in either Spanish or English depending on participant preference. Audio recordings were transcribed and analyzed using inductive grounded theory coding methods in order to identify recurring themes and patterns across participant narratives.

The project also incorporated collaborative community-engaged practices throughout the research process. Nuevos Vecinos leadership provided guidance on recruitment, participant outreach, and culturally responsive research practices. Student research assistants supported transcription, translation verification, interview preparation, and data organization. Community feedback sessions were also incorporated to ensure that findings remained accountable to participant experiences and community priorities.

## Summary of Findings

The findings from this project demonstrate that mutual aid spaces such as Nuevos Vecinos provide much more than material assistance. Participants consistently described the organization as a space where migrants could regain dignity, visibility, emotional support, and social connection after periods of instability and displacement.

A major finding centered on the significance of clothing as both a practical and symbolic resource. Ten of the fifteen participants described arriving in Chicago with little more than the clothing they were wearing. Participants discussed the immediate challenges of adapting to Chicago winters and navigating public visibility through clothing. Eight participants specifically identified winter coats and cold-weather gear as urgent needs during their arrival period. Several participants also emphasized the importance of undergarments, socks, and hygiene-related items, noting that these everyday necessities contributed significantly to feelings of comfort and dignity.

Another recurring theme involved clothing as a form of social and professional legibility. Five participants described using clothing provided through Nuevos Vecinos to prepare for job

interviews, work opportunities, or school participation. Participants frequently connected appearance with confidence and the ability to be recognized as capable, employable, and deserving of respect. These narratives revealed how material support often functioned simultaneously as emotional and rhetorical support.

The research also identified the importance of volunteering itself as a process of healing and belonging. Participants frequently described volunteering not simply as service work, but as an opportunity to transition from receiving aid to contributing to community care. Volunteering enabled participants to build relationships, share information, practice leadership, and develop a sense of purpose during periods of uncertainty.

One especially meaningful example discussed by multiple participants involved a community wedding dress event organized through Nuevos Vecinos. Participants described the event as emotionally significant because it allowed couples to celebrate important life moments that migration and displacement had interrupted. These stories illustrated how mutual aid organizations often facilitate forms of emotional restoration that extend beyond emergency assistance.

Across interviews, the project identified three major thematic findings that help explain how mutual aid functions rhetorically, emotionally, and socially within migrant communities.

### *From Exposure to Legibility*

Participants frequently described arrival experiences marked by exposure, uncertainty, and visibility in unfamiliar public spaces. Several participants explained that inadequate clothing made them feel immediately identifiable as newly arrived migrants, especially during Chicago winters. In some interviews, participants discussed feelings of embarrassment or anxiety about wearing the same clothing repeatedly, lacking weather-appropriate clothing, or appearing unprepared in professional or public settings. Clothing therefore became closely tied to questions of dignity, safety, and recognition.

At the same time, participants described how receiving appropriate clothing through Nuevos Vecinos helped them feel more confident navigating workplaces, schools, transportation systems, and public interactions. Clothing often served as a tool that allowed participants to feel “ready,” “presentable,” or “normal” within environments where they otherwise felt highly visible or socially vulnerable. Rather than functioning solely as material aid, clothing became part of a broader process through which participants reconstructed stability and social legibility after displacement. These narratives demonstrate how seemingly ordinary material items can shape migrants’ experiences of belonging and participation in civic life.

### *Clothing as Therapeutic Repair*

A second major finding involved the emotional dimensions of clothing distribution and mutual aid. Participants repeatedly emphasized that receiving clothing was meaningful not only because

it met immediate physical needs, but because it communicated care, respect, and recognition during moments of instability. Many participants associated clothing support with emotional relief after periods of fear, displacement, or prolonged uncertainty.

Participants often described small items such as socks, jackets, undergarments, or children's clothing in deeply emotional terms because these items restored feelings of comfort, normalcy, and self-worth. Several interviews revealed that the process of selecting clothing in a welcoming environment also differed significantly from previous experiences of aid or institutional assistance. Participants valued being treated with patience and dignity rather than as anonymous recipients of charity.

The therapeutic dimension of the project became especially visible in participant discussions of community events organized through Nuevos Vecinos. For example, multiple participants referenced the wedding dress event hosted by the organization, where migrant couples were able to celebrate weddings and receive formal attire. Participants described the event as joyful, healing, and emotionally significant because it allowed families to reclaim important life milestones disrupted by migration. These experiences illustrate how mutual aid organizations frequently provide forms of emotional restoration that extend beyond emergency response or material distribution.

### *Affective Glue*

The third major theme centered on the role of volunteering and mutual aid in building social connection, trust, and collective belonging. Participants consistently described Nuevos Vecinos not simply as a service organization, but as a relational community space where friendships, support systems, and shared identities were formed. Volunteering allowed participants to transition from receiving assistance to actively contributing to the wellbeing of others, which many described as empowering and affirming.

Participants frequently explained that volunteering reduced feelings of isolation and helped them establish routines, social networks, and a sense of purpose during difficult transition periods. In several interviews, participants emphasized that working alongside other migrants created opportunities to exchange information about housing, employment, schools, transportation, and city resources. These everyday interactions strengthened informal networks of support that extended beyond the physical space of the organization itself.

The concept of “affective glue” emerged from the ways participants described emotional attachment and collective care within the volunteer community. Acts such as organizing donations, helping families select clothing, translating for newcomers, or preparing community events became mechanisms for sustaining relationships and reinforcing shared responsibility. In this sense, mutual aid functioned not only as a response to material need, but also as a rhetorical and emotional practice that cultivated belonging, solidarity, and communal resilience.

Nuevos Vecinos contributed substantially to every phase of the project. Organizational leaders supported participant recruitment, offered insight into community priorities, and facilitated trust-building with volunteers. Student workers also played an important role in supporting transcription, translation review, and data management. Their participation strengthened the collaborative and educational dimensions of the research process.

The final products associated with this project were intentionally designed to remain accessible to both academic and community audiences. In addition to traditional research outputs, the project emphasized public-facing materials and collaborative community engagement efforts that could support future organizing, storytelling, and volunteer training initiatives.