

Good times  
with friends!



## DR. CHANDRA PONNIAH'S INTERNATIONAL OUTREACH PROGRAM

“

We have great schools  
and a great hospital,  
and the meetings are a  
chance to learn about local  
businesses and educational  
opportunities.”

DR. CHANDRA PONNIAH  
Group Founder

Dr. Chandra Ponniah has been living in Norfolk for more than a decade, and he knows what it's like to live far away from home and family. Originally from a large metropolis in Malaysia, moving his family to Norfolk was quite a shift. However, Ponniah found Norfolk to be a great place to balance work and family. “We initially planned to stay in Norfolk for only two years, but we met good friends and the kids were happy in school,” he said, and so the family stayed.

However, settling down in a new city is not easy. Often, new physicians who are recruited to the area stay for the length of their contract, but then leave. “I’ve seen a lot of professionals, mostly physicians, come here, but then they leave the community. A lot of times, I think, they don’t feel at home or they don’t have a sense of community,” says Ponniah. Last year, he came up with an idea to help new physicians find the

same sense of belonging that he found.

He formed a special group for medical professionals living in Norfolk who hail from all corners of the globe. While Ponniah’s roots are in Malaysia, others in the group come from Nepal, Pakistan, India, Palestine, Europe and Africa, and have a variety of different cultural and religious backgrounds. Many of them move here with their spouses or families, and the group provides a place for them to meet others who are coming here from other countries.

The group shares religious and cultural festivities with each other that aren’t widely celebrated in Norfolk. With only a small Muslim and Hindu community in the area, the group is able to provide a space to celebrate important holidays together. Although often held in group members’ homes, the celebrations are sometimes open to the public as well. Dr. Krishna Velagapudi has hosted an



## LIVE INTERNATIONAL OUTREACH



annual Diwali celebration for the public at his restaurant, Aroma Circuit, for several years.

The group also gets together to connect with local resources and services. Guest speakers attend to showcase what the community has to offer. "The foundation of the group at the end of the day is to create a community," says group member Dr. Mark Shashikant. "A large portion of our medical staff are foreign born. It's great for them, but it is also great for our community because it increases retention."

Increasing retention of medical specialists is important not only for financial reasons, but for quality health care. The cost to recruit new medical specialists, like an endocrinologist or pulmonologist, is high. Keeping doctors in the area can potentially lower health

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DR. MARK SHASHIKANT,  
Group Member

care costs. Patients benefit from consistency of care as well when they can build a relationship with their doctor over a longer period of time. The community, the economy and the physicians themselves all benefit when the physicians and their families feel involved and invested in the community.



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So far, the group has grown by word of mouth, and Ponniah would like to see it continue to grow. There are hopes to have a community event in the future that would celebrate the rich cultural heritage that the group brings to the city. Currently called the International Medical Group due to the focus on physicians, the group is opening up to

other professionals. "It's a work in progress," says Ponniah. A name change could be on the horizon, too, but the focus is still the same: creating a place to call home. ■

### LEARN MORE

Email Dr. Ponniah at  
cponniah@hotmail.com

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**Casey Knoke**  
CFP®, CLU®, ChFC®, CAP®  
\*Financial Advisor  
\*Managing Partner  
cknoke@heritagefin.net



**Ben Conover**  
\*Financial Advisor  
\*Partner  
bconover@heritagefin.net



**Tim Brungardt**  
LUTCF  
\*Financial Advisor  
tbrungardt@heritagefin.net



**Mitchell Schultze**  
\*Financial Advisor  
mschultze@heritagefin.net



**Colby Conover**  
\*Financial Advisor  
cconover@heritagefin.net



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