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Volunteers from across Connecticut train in New Haven to help resettle refugees

From across Connecticut, congregations train to offer other a new life

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NEW HAVEN >> It will be an intense six months.

Motivated by religious faith, civic duty or both, dozens of volunteers sat on folding chairs in a makeshift conference room one recent day for a 6-hour training session on their responsibilities in agreeing to help resettle refugee families.

Jere Sirkis, a member of [Mishkan Israel in Hamden](#), was typical of the group.

She said her family is comfortable and she and her husband seek out opportunities to give back to others with more than just handouts.

They also want to be an example to their children, ages 8 and 11. "I'm constantly looking for ways for them to understand that other people are less privileged," Sirkis said.

When the [national politics around refugees](#) became so "venomous," Sirkis said she knew she had to get involved to counter it.

"It's such a serious issue. I'm so disgusted by the rhetoric and the voices," Sirkis said of the push back, particularly against [Syrian refugees](#), where 2,647 out of 4.5 million have been admitted to the U.S.

Some 60 congregations around the state are working with [Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services](#), or IRIS, which wants to resettle 500 refugees in Connecticut this year, up from 240 individuals.

The congregations at this most recent training session represented a cross-section of faith groups and communities. In addition to Greater New Haven, there were members of synagogues, a mosque, a Mormon temple and Christian churches from Bloomfield, Avon, West Hartford and Brookfield.

"There is a crisis out there in the world — 19 million refugees. We are going to do as much as we can do ourselves with your help," said Chris George, the executive director of IRIS, as he scanned the room.

"We are confident we can resettle them (the 500) because of this — look around — this is a tiny fraction of the response from all across Connecticut," George said of the volunteers.

Connecticut, with all its resources and population of 3.4 million, George said, has welcomed only 500 a year in the last decade.

"We think that should increase. If the State Department doesn't increase it, we will ask for your help,"

said George, who might call on them to send emails and letters.

The two national organizations IRIS is affiliated with, Church World Service and Episcopal Migration Ministry, have told IRIS to plan for the 500.

“The indications are positive,” he said with an answer coming from the federal government most likely by the end of February.

George and the IRIS staff took turns giving the volunteers the rundown of what they can expect before and after their families arrive.

The co-sponsoring groups will need to find families an apartment, hook up the utilities, get donations to furnish the home and provide appropriate seasonal clothes for the families.

The biggest part of the \$5,000 co-sponsor budget will be for rent until the family is self-sufficient, which is expected to occur within six months.

“It’s a tough self-help model,” George said. “Resettlement is a struggle. We hate to sound cruel, but it is supposed to be.”

The children have to be registered in school and appointments need to be made at a clinic at Yale-New Haven Hospital for health screenings.

Everyone needs a Social Security number, as well as health insurance, and an application should be made for food stamps. Temporary Family Assistance through the state is available for up to 21 months.

The U.S. government gives each refugee “welcome money,” which is a one-time payment of \$925 that can be spent on initial expenses such as a cell phone (one per family,) food, bus passes and healthcare.

After half a year, all refugee families are responsible to pay back the government for the cost of their airfare, for which they take out a loan.

George said other governments, such as Canada, don’t seek this repayment and there are people here working on getting that waived.

The groups were told to set up committees to deal with all the aspects from housing to education to transportation, which is particularly intense in the first month. Each organization should have at least 10 volunteers they can call on to avoid burnout, but most had many more than that signed up.

They will need to make arrangements to pick up their family from the airport and prepare a culturally appropriate hot meal for them that first day. There should be four to five days worth of groceries left in their new homes.

There is a set schedule for contact with the family, as well as orientation sessions for them at IRIS.

Most importantly, a short time after their arrival, IRIS wants the adults enrolled in English classes two to three days a week.

The greatest challenge for all of them is English, but it is crucial to employment and the goal of self-sufficiency, said Greg Marino, who has been hired as the liaison with the co-sponsoring groups.

He said the goal of IRIS and the co-sponsors is to be advocates for families as they negotiate a new life

here and are able to live on their own.

The volunteers were advised to start looking for employment opportunities in service industries and factories in their communities now before they get their assignments, although IRIS will have some initial leads for them.

“Refugees are legal workers in this country the minute they step off the plane,” George told them. Within 10 days of arrival there is an employment assessment done by IRIS.

“Americans respect people who start at the bottom and work their way up. Every job comes with honor,” George said of the entry-level work that is likely to be available.

He said it is gratifying to see the refugees when they are finally in a position to pay their own rent. “We are pushing them toward independence,” he said.

Interpreters are needed and the group was told to look for them at academic centers, while literacy volunteers already in a community were said to offer invaluable help with tutoring.

There will be practical instructions in such things as the 911 emergency system, shopping at a grocery store, the importance of keeping appointments and being on time for work.

Attending parent-teacher conferences might not be intuitive for the refugees or speaking up if their children have needs.

“Be the advocate for the family. That makes the difference,” George said.

A new world

On a legal level, the newest immigrants are advised of U.S. laws against domestic violence, which covers children, as well as spouses, and the seriousness with which they are enforced here.

George said the women might not be interested in seeking employment initially or generally leave interaction with the outside world to their husbands, but that can change in six months.

Only having one person in the family responsible for most things can be disastrous if for some reason that point person can’t follow through, George said.

The hallmark of Middle Eastern cultures is hospitality and there will be many invitations from the refugee families to share a meal or come for tea. The co-sponsors were just reminded to make sure these financially strapped families don’t go overboard in trying to repay their advocates.

Given the conditions these families have lived through, often escaping violence and then living in refugee camps for years, the trauma can leave its mark.

Marino said they shouldn’t ask them what happened in their countries, but let them talk about it if they want to. “You should be trauma informed,” he said of behavior that indicates a family is struggling with their new circumstances.

The largest number of refugees will likely be coming from Syria and Afghanistan, although there will be others from Iraq, the Congo, Iran, Sudan and Eritrea.

Jen Wurst and the Rev. Bryn Smallwood-Garcia, both of the Congregational Church of Brookfield, were

much in demand for advice as they have resettled six refugees in the past decade.

It's been a great project for the church," Smallwood-Garcia said, as well as for her personally.

"Brookfield is a little crossroads kind of a town. We are really sheltered. (The resettlements) have connected our church to world ministries. It's making us appreciate what we have."

She said the families they helped "worked hard and they are motivated." After staying initially in a cottage on church property, most moved to apartments in Danbury where the price of rents presented real sticker shock.

Recently, the mother of one of the Iraqis they settled was able to sell her house in Iraq and obtain refugee status to join her family here. They have now been able to buy a home in Brookfield.

George said some refugees do have assets and need less help getting established.

There is a wide range of educational backgrounds as well. Some children have little schooling and find the American educational system difficult, while other parents feel it is not strenuous enough.

The volunteers are encouraged to contact school systems where the children will be enrolled not only to give them a heads up, but to establish a relationship with administrators.

Smallwood-Garcia said this project is a natural for all congregations to involve their teenagers, who can be tapped as babysitters.

As a minister, whose first job was to work with the homeless in California, she also had advice on drawing boundaries and the need to say no when necessary.

"Being caring and compassionate is not the same as being nice and liked all the time," Smallwood-Garcia said.

George said it was important to stay within the co-sponsors' budget so there isn't a gap between how the refugees who go through the IRIS staff and those under the tutelage of a co-sponsor are treated.

"It's destructive to the whole co-sponsorship program to go over budget," he said.

One woman from the West Hartford contingent said often people who volunteer for this kind of a mission "have a savior complex," that should be held in check.

Not surprisingly, the different faiths had similar explanations for their choices to get involved.

"First and foremost it is an opportunity to please God by helping Christian, Yazidi and Muslim refugees. Charity is an obligation in Islam towards anyone and everyone in need. We are doing this because it's the right thing to do in a time when so many people are in need. We would expect them or others to do the same for us if we were in such a desperate need," said Imam Sami A. Aziz of the Bloomfield Muslim Community Center.

He is part of a group in the West Hartford area that includes: Flagg Road United Church of Christ, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the Unitarian Society of Hartford, the First Congregational Church in Bloomfield, the First Church in Windsor and the Jewish Federation.

Aziz said his group also has access to almost all the needed languages, including Arabic, to help IRIS.

The Rev. Sharon Gracon of Trinity Episcopal in Branford, said her congregation is still in the discernment process, doing necessary education to relieve any anxiety among parishioners about what she said is media misrepresentation of Islam.

Gracon said, for instance, jihad is the personal spiritual struggle to be the best you can be in the pursuit of justice and peace, not a holy war through terrorist acts against unbelievers.

As a Christian, she said “we are called to welcome the stranger.” Gracon said part of the Baptismal covenant “ is to seek and serve Christ in all persons. We see these refugees as our brothers and sisters.”

Sydney Perry, the outgoing executive director of the Jewish Federation of Greater New Haven, said tzedakah in Hebrew refers to doing justice, while tikkun olam is an obligation for Jews to repair the world. She said both underlie the desire to reach out to others in need.

The question was asked how long each group should wait before working to settle a second family.

The Brookfield contingent said they took a year off between volunteering and George also had advice.

“Six months is the end of your intensive help. I would say you want to take at least six months off. We have a lot of groups so I wouldn’t feel there is an urgency to get back on track quickly,” George told Jean Silk, who was hired by the Jewish Federation of Greater New Haven to coordinate volunteers from five synagogues in Greater New Haven.

“That’s too long,” Perry said. “The need is too great.”

Silk said she has between 80 and 100 volunteers whom she has promised would all be able to participate. After they have successfully resettled their first family and raised more money, Silk said they hope to work with a total of three families over a year’s time.

Congregation Mishkan Israel of Hamden, Congregation Beth-El-Keser Israel of New Haven, Congregation B’Nai Jacob of Woodbridge and Temple Emanuel of Greater New Haven, located in Orange, are calling the collaboration Silk is helping run, the Jewish Community Alliance for Refugee Resettlement. The social action committee of Or Shalom has also recently gotten involved with the group.

Sirkis, who has been spreading the word of her involvement with IRIS, said she has gotten nothing but support from her friends and acquaintances.

She said she feels there are a lot of people out there who feel the same as she does.

“They are just not as vocal as the haters,” Sirkis said.

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