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LOCAL RESIDENTS OFFER TRANSPORTATION, CLOTHING AND GUIDANCE TO AID  
REFUGEES IN SETTLING DOWN

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EVANSTON, Ill – After escaping their war-torn homes and being ripped apart from loved ones, families from countries including Afghanistan, Ukraine and Venezuela arrive in the United States in increasing numbers. Evanston, a quiet town some 14 miles north of Downtown Chicago, is also taking on its fair share of refugees.

“We all live on the same globe, and these people never expected to be in this situation. We don’t know if we’d end up in similar situations, so I think I treat them how I would like to be treated,” said volunteer Michelle Beck, 57.

However, this is no small feat. With unclear legal status and limited English, these families struggle to get accustomed.

“I feel like [residents] are picking up where [the] government is failing. We have a small fund that’s available for migrants that are living in Evanston; unfortunately...the housing market is incredibly tight and expensive. Based on my work, it’s especially hard because they don’t have

any work or credit history. When they come here, there's a waiting period before they're allowed to work," said 9th Ward Councilmember Juan Geracaris, 48.

In response to this, Evanston residents have taken it upon themselves to offer local assistance.

"After the 2016 election, my partner and I wanted...to fight the...[perpetuated] division [within our country]. We looked for volunteer opportunities and weren't finding them. [After listening to a refugee and volunteer speak at a local church,] from there, we basically began helping...Afghan refugees arriving under Special Immigrant Visas," said Dr. Nan Warshaw, one of the founders of the Refugee Community Connection.

Dr. Warshaw, 60, described the organization's efforts to have grown organically as they used their large social media networks to crowdsource necessities for families. Ultimately, when their house began overflowing with donated items, she returned to the church for space.

Since then, the Refugee Community Center personally welcomes Special Immigrant Visa holders by providing resources, information and household necessities. Families can shop from a plethora of free donated goods at the organization's four free stores and the Chicago Furniture Bank.

With over 7,000 volunteer members in their Facebook group, the Refugee Community Center has 4,128 members based in Chicago and 450 members based in Evanston. Every day, on

average, dozens of messages are exchanged through Facebook, 10 new member requests are sent to join the group and one or two new families arrive seeking assistance.

With such a large organization, members work in a variety of different areas. Dr. Warshaw, for example, conducts the basic intake and shares that information with key volunteers. She then pairs that family's needs with a free store or with volunteers who can get those items they need.

Generally helping with education or school-related issues such as enrolling kids in schools, translating parent-teacher conferences and taking kids out to community outings, member Kristin Huzar, 53, also volunteers at the free stores and sources donations.

"I feel like we are set up to receive kids in our schools, [and] I feel like Evanston has resources that they can offer to people while they navigate their asylum cases and [search for housing]," said Huzar.

Refugee Community Connection is not the only active organization aiding refugees. Volunteer Maureen Spurr, 57, helps South American Venezuelans with housing needs in a group called Nuevos Vecinos.

"I don't need money to do this...[It's extremely gratifying] seeing how thankful they are, and they send us the sweetest messages."

Volunteers have been referred to as “madrinas” – which translates to “godmothers” in Spanish. A refugee even said, “You’re an angel from the sky. I’m so glad God put you in my path.”

Though they create enriching relationships with their new neighbors and other volunteers, members hope for better outcomes in the future for the sake of these numerous displaced families.

“This influx of people isn’t going to go away, and I hope that our city is prepared...to give people services to be able to stay here and to get their needs met while they’re...seeing what the new phase of their life is going to be. This is something we have to be working on urgently,” said Huzar. “They are new neighbors: they deserve our love, our attention and our care.”

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