

"Our response to the challenges posed by contemporary migration can be summed up in four verbs: welcome, protect, promote and integrate" – Pope Francis

PRIVATE REFUGEE SPONSORSHIP Roundtable Report 2019



BACKGROUND

Catholic Social Services facilitates private refugee sponsorship on behalf of the Archdiocese of Edmonton. In the spring of 2019, Archbishop Richard Smith and Catholic Social Services CEO, Troy Davies, arranged for a roundtable gathering of parish representatives who participated in the sponsorship of refugee families, particularly in the last five to ten years. The aim was to listen to the parishes' experiences of sponsorship and to learn from their successes and challenges so that these insights could be shared with others.



**Archbishop
Richard Smith**



**Troy Davies
CEO, Catholic
Social Services**

THE GATHERING

The roundtable was held on June 8, 2019 at the Archdiocesan Pastoral & Administration Offices in Edmonton. There were a total of 53 registrants representing 20 different parishes throughout the Archdiocese. The roundtable discussion was divided into three sessions:

1. **What were the 'best practices' that made refugee sponsorship a success in your parish?**
2. **What were the greatest challenges the parish faced with the refugee sponsorship program and how were these challenges met?**
3. **How do you see your parish moving forward with refugee sponsorship?**

Responses to these questions were gathered, amalgamated and thematically arranged for this summary report.

BEST PRACTICES

There were several best practices that emerged from a roundtable that can serve as helpful guidelines for refugee sponsorship success going forward.



STRONG PARISH INVOLVEMENT

Having a wide diversity of parishioners involved leads to success, and can include many different activities such as:

- Making contributions of money, food, furniture, time and talent
- Spreading responsibilities among many parishioners and even volunteers outside of the parish
- Regular communications in the parish bulletin and vocal support from the local parish priest
- Hosting fundraisers and welcoming parties
- Opportunities for parishioners to meet and interact with the sponsored refugee family
- Praying for the new family

EFFECTIVE PLANNING

Some key organizational elements for the sponsorship team to keep in mind include:

- Putting in place a well-organized, caring, compassionate and committed team of volunteers
- Assigning responsibilities based on each volunteer's strengths, including a detail-minded person to handle all paperwork
- Keeping a checklist for all tasks involved and staying organized
- Securing an interpreter for communications
- Meeting with refugees who have already settled to learn from their experiences and advice
- Seeking out experienced sponsors to learn from their experience and mistakes

SUCCESSFUL FAMILY INTEGRATION

This is a top consideration. What can be helpful is:

- If appropriate, involve the refugee family in the life of the parish to foster a sense of connection
- Providing an orientation to life in Canada
- Keeping communication channels open and active, especially listening to their many needs, including language training
- Introducing families from the same country
- Finding volunteer opportunities for those who cannot work and making connections with employers for those who can work
- Creating a volunteer driver list to get family members to appointments
- Mentoring from parish members

BUILDING AWARENESS

It is important that sponsors have a strong sense of awareness as well as building it amongst others:

- Learn about the refugee family's country, culture, and conditions before they arrive
- Consider setting up a bulletin board in the church foyer
- Provide news updates in the parish bulletin
- Be aware of community resources that can be accessed, including support from Catholic Social Services



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MEETING CHALLENGES

Private sponsorship of refugees creates a rewarding experiences for refugees and sponsors alike, however, it is not without some challenges, for the refugee family itself, as well as to parish and sponsorship teams.

REFUGEES

- The greatest challenge for most refugees involved barriers to communication which included perceived lack of adult ESL opportunities, lack of materials in their own language, and lack of interpreters for urgent needs
- Employment was also a significant challenge. A variety of factors were at play including transportation to worksites, fewer jobs being available in rural communities and unrealistic expectations for comparable employment to what they had previously, particularly if they came with professional training
- These challenges were best addressed through educational counselling, ESL and job training, and a robust network of support

THE PARISH

- Maintaining the parish's enthusiasm for the sponsorship was the greatest challenge identified. Long wait times for the families to arrive and competing parish needs chipped away at the initial excitement
- In some parishes, the misunderstanding of the plight of the refugees and the influence of negative media created an unease
- A continuous flow of open and authentic communication was the best way to meet the challenges faced by the parish

THE SPONSORSHIP TEAMS

- Committee burnout, long wait times, short notice of arrivals and meeting the many needs of the refugee families were the top challenges identified by this group
- Sponsorship teams self-identified their own concerns as secondary to those of the refugees and the parish, revealing an inspiring spirit of servant leadership
- Accessing resources, inviting in new team members and discerning individual team member talents were helpful ways to meet challenges



MOVING FORWARD

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Those gathered at the roundtable spoke about how they see their parish being involved, or not being involved, with private refugee sponsorship in the future. Key themes that emerged when looking to the future were:

- A concern among some parishioners that their parish would not participate in future sponsorship due to the financial commitments required, the lengthy process involved in sponsoring a family, and general fatigue among sponsorship team members
- In light of this concern, it was determined that future success of the sponsorship program in parishes will depend on the following:
 - A parish-wide commitment to planning and communication
 - Some parishes collaborating to co-sponsor a family
 - Verbal, emotional and practical support from parish priests
 - Building strong relationships with refugee families
 - Enhanced federal government support
 - Continued support from Catholic Social Services
 - Spiritual formation of the team and parish regarding our duty to the geographically-displaced

It was felt by everyone that the sponsorship program yields so many wonderful benefits, most obviously for the refugee family involved, but also for the parish itself. It was an opportunity for parishioners to step forward as volunteers and donors, which deepened their attachment to the parish, fostered a sense of community spirit, and raised awareness of Christian social justice and Catholic social teaching

REFUGEES & SPONSORSHIP: THE CURRENT PICTURE

- The number of refugees in the world has increased to 25.4 million and for most of them resettlement to a third country is the only chance to rebuild their lives with safety and security
- Canada has become the number one resettlement country in the world in part through the involvement of private sponsoring groups
- Parishes in the Archdiocese of Edmonton generously responded to the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015
- A federal initiative called the Blended Visa Office Referred (BVOR) program is another way that parishes can sponsor refugees referred by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The BVOR program provides some financial support through the federal government and sponsored refugees are typically processed faster and arrive in Canada quicker

A WORD OF APPRECIATION...

On behalf of our entire team of 1800 employees at Catholic Social Services I would like to thank the Archdiocese of Edmonton for entrusting to us the honour of administering, on its behalf, the Refugee Sponsorship Agreement it holds with the federal government. I would also like to thank the many parishes and parishioners across the Archdiocese who have responded with generosity, kindness and compassion to the plight of our brothers and sisters throughout the world who have been displaced by a life of persecution, violence and war. These people have found a friend in you. May St. Frances Cabrini, patron saint of refugees, intercede for us.

Blessings always,



Dr. Troy Davies, CEO



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