

COMMITTEE REPORTS

REFUGEE SPONSORSHIP PROGRAM

Since the beginning of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in 2015, the Anglican Diocese of British Columbia's Refugee Sponsorship Program has continued to grow in interest, in effort and in generosity of both the parish community and the broader ethnic communities among us. Even after the media shifted towards other headlines, veering away from the global refugee crisis currently claiming over 26 million people, the interest and motivation to bring people to a safe place continues to rise.

Sponsorship groups with the Program mainly reflected parish engagement, predominantly from 2015 to 2018. As time passed, efforts to sponsor refugees evolved into former refugees, who were sponsored by parish volunteers, sponsoring bring their loved ones to join them. As a result, there are currently eight parishes involved with sponsorship (compared to over 35 originally involved) while the remaining sponsorships for over 300 people are family related (or family linked) cases. Cultural groups like the Oromo Community, the Eritrean Community, the Syrian Community and others are now the predominant voices and volunteers of the program. The top countries of origin among those being sponsored are from Syria, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia.

The Refugee Sponsorship Program (RSP) has processed applications for over 800 people. Since 2016, over 450 people have arrived, settling on Vancouver and the surrounding Gulf Islands. Currently, over 250 people are still awaiting acceptance into Canada. Due to the uncertain future of the program, the staff have had to cease taking on any new interests for sponsorship, as the wait list is currently over 300 people extending into 2022 and 2023. The needs are truly great, and the RSP continues to facilitate sponsorships more than all other SAHs on the island, averaging 148 people submitted for sponsorship each year.

Most of the work necessary to land and support refugees is done by volunteers. However, the Diocesan Program is the mechanism by which this is accomplished and is responsible for ensuring the readiness of volunteer groups, providing necessary training, monitoring the work of all groups both family linked and parish led, meeting all the requirements directed by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and so much more. While the settlement support is predominantly held by volunteers, it is the staff who ensure the safety of both the volunteers and the sponsored families; adhere to Federal mandates; engage with community support agencies and organizations; process

and mitigate applications; advocate for sponsorship volunteers; acquire additional program funding; conduct financial and settlement training; and coordinate both financial and settlement monitoring. While the Diocese has committed to financial support for one full-time employee, staff have successfully acquired grants to sustain the level of support needed to meet the high demands. Since 2017, program staff have secured, on average, \$30,000 per year through municipal and community grants.

Tony Davis is the North Island Coordinator who has successfully trained, monitored, and achieved successful sponsorships for many people these past six years. As of April 2021, Tony will be retiring from the program and will pass the position to Kimme Russell. Former Coordinator Rebecca Siebert left the work in the South Island in 2019, wherein two coordinators were hired to split her position. One of the coordinators, Alvaro Moreno, left in 2020 due to health concerns and the program has been sustained by the other coordinator Andrea McCoy.

COVID-19 had not only impacted the rate of people arriving on Vancouver Island, but also negatively impacted financial support for both sponsorships and the program. Despite the many variables that have fought against the program, the work and effort of engaging in God's world, meeting the most vulnerable and providing a place of safety, respect and security, continues to be the mission of the program. While many ministries, projects, and missions have had to resign to the negative impacts of COVID-19, the program has done the opposite. People are in great need. And the RSP has met many of those needs and hopes to continue for many years to come.

The work of the RSP is truly the work of our Savior Jesus Christ, who goes to prepare a place for us. Volunteers prepare that place for strangers, for family, for the naked, for the poor, for the sick and for those who were imprisoned. This is the work of Jesus on Vancouver Island.

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' . . . Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." Matthew 25:35-36, 45

Submitted by:
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