

Faith Community Response Central American Children Fleeing Violence Building Welcome through Hospitality

Context

Unaccompanied children are coming to the U.S. due to rising levels of violence, gang activity, drug cartels and life threatening circumstances. Thus far over 60,000 children fleeing violence have come to the U.S. in 2014. According to the bi-partisan Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, passed in 2008 and signed by President George W. Bush, Health and Human Services are required to screen Central American children for humanitarian protection and asylum claims. Holding facilities have opened all over the country to house this mass influx of children. Many faith communities are responding by collecting goods to donate to the children and offering housing when possible.

In some situations immigration enforcement has dropped off released detainees at local bus stations or store parking lots. Often times these are vulnerable women and children who speak little to no English. They are released with no identification, money or cell phones, and only have a *notice to appear* document that provides them a court date for their case to be heard. Faith communities have been monitoring this situation and responding.

How Your Congregation Can Respond

The direct service response for this vulnerable population is imperative to accompany them to safe spaces and to assist in reuniting them with their families. Almost every new release will have a family member with whom they plan to stay with until their court date.

Below is a step-by-step process to follow if immigrants are being released in your community.

- 1) **Assess and evaluate the situation:** When and where are immigrants being released? How many are being released? Who is releasing them?
- 2) **Communicate and Mobilize with Partners:** Work with local ecumenical, interfaith and non-profit organizations and partners. Call a meeting and communicate what is happening with your partners.
- 3) **Make a Plan:** Once you have communicated and began to organize locally, the next step is to make a plan. How will you divide labor? Think about the resources you have among partners regarding shelter, transportation, cell phone use, petty cash, and staff time to help with logistics and coordination.
- 4) **Basic Needs**
 - a) **Schedule regular pick-ups:** Rotate pick-ups according to your capacity, have a way to identify when immigrants are being dropped off. Make sure there are bilingual people who can interpret. Try to identify ways to negotiate with immigration enforcement on scheduling drop offs, sometimes authorities will call ahead or even drop them off at a church instead of a parking lot.
 - b) **Phone Assistance in travel needs:** Most newly released immigrants will be trying to reunite with a family member in the U.S. The most important tool here will be a phone. Through borrowing a cell phone they can arrange money to be wired, or a family member could buy a bus ticket for them in their name over the internet.
 - c) **Food, Water and Clothing:** Most newly released immigrants will be hungry and thirsty. Often times they only have the clothes that were on their back and may need a change of clothes or a sweater to keep them warm at night. See the below list of helpful items you can collect in your congregation to make welcome kits.
 - Bottled water
 - Non-perishable Food Items (easy to open and don't need to heat up)
 - Granola bars, trail mix and other healthy snacks
 - Generic clothing for all ages, jeans, shirts, hats, underwear, sweatshirts
 - Diapers for various ages
 - Backpacks
 - Reading materials in Spanish (books, workbooks, Bibles, teen magazines)
 - First aid kit

- Travel-size Toiletries (shampoo, conditioner, body wash/bar soap, toothpaste, toothbrush, brush/comb, deodorant)
 - Small blanket
 - Wipes and hand sanitizer
- 5) **Shelter and Housing:** Many newly released immigrants will want to get on a bus and get to their family as soon as possible. (They won't be able to fly to their destination because of lack of identification). Some will have to wait to hear back from a family member, or will need time to coordinate the bus ticket purchase. In these cases they will likely need housing for the time they are waiting.
- a) **Identify housing at a Church:** Housing at churches can be very helpful, but you will need someone from that church to handle logistics, making sure the facility is taken care of and the families' needs are met.
 - b) **Supporter Housing:** Coordinating supporter housing with congregants can be an excellent way to engage more people, and provide a comfortable and homey temporary housing for those in need. Ensure the host family is trustworthy, trained in hospitality and has some way to communicate with the immigrant family, providing English is not their first language.
- 6) **Dealing with the Media:** The local media will pick up on this story and likely want an interview. It is imperative that we utilize this as an opportunity to create a narrative of welcome to those in need, so that the broader public can see the faith community's response of prophetic hospitality and follow our lead. See below messaging tips.
- We cannot allow thousands of refugee children to be put at risk of exploitation, trafficking, rape and even death. It is our role as the faith community to welcome the stranger in our midst and to love our neighbor.
 - This is not a border crisis; it is a crisis of violence in Central America. Children are fleeing safety because they are facing life-threatening situations. When they arrive to our communities, we have a moral duty to respond with love and care.
 - It is unconscionable that some politicians would want to roll back protections for children just because there are more children in need of protection. Expediting the deportation of children without proper screening and allowing their case to be heard is wrong for these kids and not who we are as a nation.

Join Church World Service in Responding to Refugee Children

Church World Service has launched an ecumenical response to this crisis by extending hospitality to refugee women and children. Working with local partners CWS is responding in the following ways:

- **CONNECT** – CWS staff and volunteers are currently assisting with religious services and providing support in a detention facility in Artesia, New Mexico. We invite you to connect to children in detention through Church World Service's **Angel to Angel Program**. *Be an Angel and send a card to an Angel in the Artesia Family Residential Center in Artesia, New Mexico.* The children have little contact with the world outside. The knowledge that people of faith are holding them in prayer is meaningful to them – a reminder that they are loved and welcomed by many in the United States.
- **ADVOCATE** - The House and Senate need to hear that their constituents reject legislation that would hurt children, and want to see them pass a clean supplemental to help children and refugees. Call your Representative and both your Senators by calling 1-866-940-2439 or (202) 224-3121.
- **DONATE** – funds are urgently needed to help provide legal services. CWS hopes to provide pro-bono legal services throughout the U.S. where children and families are sent after initial screenings. To find out more go to www.cwsglobal.org.
- **PRAY** – Pray for the protection of the children who have travelled hundreds of miles to escape the violence in their home countries. A full set of worship resources can be found by contacting the

[Interfaith Immigration Coalition](#). These resources can assist in building prayerful awareness for the plight of displaced people. You may want to incorporate these 'sermon seeds' into your worship services:

- *Story of Moses*: A country leader ordered midwives to kill baby boys of a certain ethnicity and gave an order that every boy born of this ethnicity be thrown into the sea. One woman became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She wanted him to live, so hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him, padded it, and placed the child in the river in hopes that someone would find him and keep him safe. This story is similar to Central American children, whose parents have to send them on dangerous journeys in order to save their lives. Unfortunately, there has been much shaming in the media of these parents who, like Moses' mother, have to make these heartbreaking decisions for the safety of their children.
- *Story of Mary, Joseph and Jesus*: A man claims that an angel appeared to him and told him to take his wife and infant son and flee the country, because the country's leader had issued a mandate to kill all infant boys. They went to a town far away to try to live in safety. The holy family reminds us of the many families seeking safety for reasons others might not understand. Central American families fleeing violence should not be detained or deported, they should be allowed to seek safety in the United States.
- *Let the Little Children Come to me*: In Matthew 19:13-14 the disciples intend to send the children away, similar to many in our own society. Children were given little status or space to talk with public leaders. Jesus chose to receive the children as a witness and symbol to what his vision of the realm of God is "for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." Now we are also called to receive the Central American children who face grave violence in their home countries. In Matthew 18:5, Jesus says that "anyone who welcomes a child in my name welcomes me."