**Holy Trinity Steps to Accompanying a Refugee Family**

1. **Deciding to Accompany a Family**
   1. **Energy**. There has to be energy to undertake such an intensive activity. For us, there was one family really committed to the idea plus several other parishioners with keen interest. It took us about a year to determine how we would go about accompanying a family (i.e., to find an organization that was resettling in our area).
   2. **Point people**. Once we connected with that organization (Lutheran Social Services, “LSS”) our initial point people were the 2-3 parishioners who had expressed the most interest in the idea.
   3. **Orientation**. Together with the pastoral associate for social justice, two point people attended an overview orientation for Lutheran Social Services to learn the details of what accompaniment would look like in practice. We were given a packet of information that included, among other things, suggestions for organizing our team, a timeline, and the options for levels of support for a family.
   4. **Kick-off**. With the information we learned at the LSS orientation, we put together a packet of information for parishioners interested in assisting in the accompaniment effort. We organized a session to provide this information at a parishioner’s home. It was important to us that the kick-off not be at the parish to emphasize that this was to be a parishioner driven effort (not parish staff driven). Also, it made the session less formal and invited people to learn without feeling like they were committing up front.
   5. **Follow-Up and Survey**. Everyone that attended the kick-off and anyone that indicated an interest even if they couldn’t attend in person received a follow up email that summarized what we discussed at the meeting. It also contained an electronic copy of the papers that were distributed at the kick-off. And, most importantly, it contained a survey asking each person to identify what they thought was the appropriate level of commitment for the parish and for them individually. The survey also asked each person to identify at least one team (welcome, food, finance, clothing, housing/furnishing, employment, or transportation) that they would commit to working with.
2. **Making the Commitment**
   1. **Survey Responses**. We used the survey response rate and commitments indicated on the surveys to determine if we had enough interest and people power to move forward.
   2. **Team Leads**. Once we determined we had enough serious interest (about 25 people) we identified team leads for each of our initial teams – general coordinator, welcome, food, finance, clothing, housing/furnishing, employment, transportation).
   3. **Volunteers**. We then divided all of our volunteers into teams. As many people said something along the lines of “I’ll do anything.” We put those folks onto the welcome team. In the end, the welcome team didn’t really do much and we had lots of people there. We ended up moving many of them to other teams. In the future, we would suggest just having about 5 people on the welcome team and making everyone else identify another team they are willing to assist. The transportation team, in particular, ends up needing a lot of people. It is also worth noting that in the summer people’s availability changes dramatically. You’ll need a big team to deal with this week to week.
   4. **Contract with LSS**. Once we knew what level of commitment we wanted to make and as we organized ourselves, we completed the contract with LSS to officially request a family as part of their Good Neighbor Program. This requires parish approval/signature as well as a lot of parishioner buy-in.
   5. **Finance**. It was important to identify people to head up a finance team early on. They were able to develop a draft budget for the family and quietly raise some initial seed dollars to fulfill it. Also, as volunteers came on board they were able to build on the initial donations so that we were never without sufficient funds to assist the family. In terms of identifying finance team leads, we thought it was important to ask people who knew a bit about the donors within the parish community. It was also important to select people in whom we had great confidence, as well as confidence that they could operate independently. This enabled them to work parallel to our effort to get the family set up and oriented.
3. **Waiting for a Family/Engaging the Team**
   1. **Team Leader Cultural Orientation.** While we waited for a family to be identified for us we sought to keep our volunteers engaged. The first thing we did was have LSS come to the parish and conduct a cultural orientation for our team leaders. During this evening the team leaders learned the basics of the refugee resettlement process. They learned about the types of responses refugees have to being refugees. They learned about ways LSS could assist. And they had an opportunity to ask any questions they had about what they were about to do.
   2. **Full Team Meeting**. We also had a full team meeting to help our team connect and to learn a bit more about a refugee’s experiences. For this meeting we had the outreach people from LSS attend as well as a parishioner who had been an assylee (Ronnate Asirwatham) and another parishioner who had volunteered in a refugee camp in Calais, France (Linda Arnold[[1]](#footnote-1)). LSS spoke in general terms about what they see as refugees try to adapt to the US. Our parishioners spoke in more specific terms about what they had experienced, and everyone asked a lot of questions.
   3. **Good Neighbor Congregations Meeting.** Attend a meeting hosted by LSS or another congregation that is accompanying a family. The learning you can get from those already in the process is priceless and you’ll make some nice contacts for future questions. You might even meet a family from the same country/ethnic group as your family, thus providing them a bit of community when they arrive.
   4. **Seed Money Kick-Off.** This happened by happenstance because we had a parishioner that was really interested in hosting something for us. It turned out to be great and I would highly encourage doing it again because it got us a nice nest egg of money early on that gave us the confidence that we’d be able to raise the necessary funds to assist the family. Also, it allowed parishioners who weren’t able to help with their time to feel connected to the effort by attending, hearing from LSS and our pastor as well as our team volunteers, and giving some money.
   5. **Film Screening**. We technically did this after our family was here. But in hindsight next time I would do it before they arrived. We hosted a screening of the film 4.1 miles with Jesuit Refugee Services. It’s a short documentary about the crossing the 4.1 miles from Turkey to Lesbos, Greece and it, better than anything I had ever seen, shows you what refugees go through to escape the war and uncertainty of their homelands.
4. **Beginning Work**
   1. **Meeting with LSS**. Once we received word that a family had been identified for us to accompany, our general coordinators, pastoral associate, and team leads met with LSS for a detailed discussion about what to expect, timelines for doing initial things like enrolling children in school and securing benefits, and how LSS’s caseworkers would assist us. It should be noted that in the end we received very little useful support from LSS caseworkers. After an initial very rocky period, the caseworker assigned to our family did respond to emails and calls if there were serious problems – like bungled health insurance enrollments – but we had to call and email quite a lot to get their attention and assistance. We ultimately assumed that except for the very largest problems that we couldn’t solve and that were generally caused by LSS we would take care of things on our own.
   2. **Prayer Vigil**. Our family was initially prohibited from traveling on their assigned date because of the president’s travel ban executive order. In a show of solidarity, we held a prayer vigil for the team and any parishioner on their travel date. We invited the interim director of Jesuit Refugee Service to preach and many parishioners attended. Regardless of travel status for a future family, we should have a prayer vigil or mass early on again. It was a nice way to invite other parishioners into the project.
   3. **Advocacy Day**. As with the prayer vigil, once we learned our family was held up by the travel ban we went to Capitol Hill to advocate for a lifting of the ban so that our family and others could travel. This was another good way to build community among our team and to further educate parishioners about the plight of refugees. We should do it again. [Side Note: We actually followed this day with a smaller day when about 10 parishioners joined JRS’s Board of Directors for a day on the Hill. They have invited us to repeat that day with them annually in the future.]
   4. **Holy Trinity School**. We worked with our parish school, particularly the fourth grade, through the school year in which we prepared for and received our family into the US. The school children spent time learning more about what it means to be a refugee and identified ways they could help. Our fourth grade started a coffee cart – once a month they sold coffee and pastries to the teachers and donated the funds to our refugee family. Also, after the travel ban was announced the school children held a prayer vigil/assembly and march to show solidarity with refugees. Finally, several Girl Scout troops based at the school assisted in cleaning and painting the family’s home before they arrived. This helped the school community to feel more connected to our accompaniment efforts as well.
   5. **Work Plans.** Our teams developed work plans to guide them through the first several months of accompanying the family.
   6. **Housing.** We started looking for housing as soon as we knew the size of our family. Ultimately we were able to secure housing just before they arrived. Because we needed the family to sign the lease, we secured temporary (2 week) housing for them initially and then moved them into their one-year rental afterward. This allowed us to show the family the home, to work with them to decorate and furnish it, and to take a little more time to fix some things in the home that needed work. [Side note: AirBnB has a refugee resettlement team that helped us find temporary housing and paid for two weeks rent.]
   7. **Team Calls.** As soon as we got word of a family, our regularly scheduled team leader calls went from every other week/once a month to weekly. They stayed weekly throughout our year-long accompaniment. The calls also went from being general question answering sessions to focused on immediate needs like food for the first week, housing, furnishings, and raising money.
5. **Family Arrives**
   1. **Timeline**. Before the family arrived, LSS gave us the following timeline of what would happen in the initial 30 days.
      1. Within 2 days: LSS home visit
      2. Within 5 days: Initial intake interview with LSS
      3. Within 7 days: Social Security cards, Medicaid, TANF, SNAP (food stamps) applied for by LSS and family given initial temporary cash assistance (cash) and first of 3 checks of refugee family funding [amount depends on size of family]
      4. Within 10 days: Register parents in ESL class, open bank account, LSS interview parents for employment services, complete and submit USCIS change of address form (with permanent rental)
      5. Within 30 days: health screenings for all, school enrollment, WIC applied for if appropriate
   2. **Experience with LSS and Timeline**. Our experience was that this timeline was not strictly adhered to. For one thing, you should begin the process of enrolling the children in school immediately. They may not need a complete health screening to begin. Second, LSS applied for Medicaid, TANF, and SNAP but you need to stay on top of them. Our case worker used the wrong address, delaying much needed benefits for almost a month and requiring a re-application for Medicaid. She also selected an MCO for the family without telling them, further delaying and confusing their medical insurance. We believe a caseworker only came to the house 1 time. The other interviews were done at LSS and generally only if we or the family requested them.
   3. **Welcome Dinner**. After so many months of preparation and waiting, our team and many of our other parishioners wanted to meet the family. We hosted a welcome reception in our parish center for the family on a Sunday afternoon. Our welcome team, along with food, put the event on and it was a big success. The family felt welcomed, supported and loved, and parishioners felt they got an opportunity to welcome the family.
   4. **Self-Reliance**. This is important – you should assume that you will need to do all of these things yourselves. You should be prepared to take the family to their county caseworker, develop a relationship with that person and get authorization from the family (if they are comfortable and don’t have much English) for you to speak with the case worker and their medical insurance on their behalf. Similarly, help the family get to know whatever school counselor or county resource person exists. They can be very helpful with the children’s transition to school.
   5. **New Teams**. Once we started actually assisting the family we found we needed 3 additional teams:
      1. Translators – any Arabic speaker you can find (help by phone is often fine)
      2. Education – oversees school enrollment, ESL enrollment, and tutoring of children and parents
      3. Medical – you need both a set of professionals to help fill gaps before Medicaid starts and, more importantly, someone to be the point person for all medical visit follow-ups, insurance problems, bill paying, and prescription filling.

We would recommend having these teams from the start.

1. **Communication**
   1. **One Email Box**. To centralize communication we created an email address on our parish server ([refugees@trinity.org](mailto:refugees@trinity.org)) that we used for corresponding with anyone interested in volunteering.
   2. **Google Drive**. We created a google drive folder where we kept our spreadsheet of volunteers, so that everyone could update it rather than keeping separate documents. We also housed other important information, phone numbers, and papers that multiple people might need here.
   3. **Central Calendar**. We created one central calendar and put one person in charge of adding events to the calendar.
   4. **Conference Calls**. From early on we had regular conference calls of our team leaders. Initially they were once every other week than they transitioned to once a week.
   5. **General Coordinators**. We identified our general coordinators (2 people) immediately and they along with the pastoral associate for social justice act as the communications hubs. We have team leads copy them on all emails so that there are several people with a good overview of the effort at all times. This is important because people go on vacations!
   6. **Parish Communication**. In terms of whole parish communication, the clergy were very helpful speaking about the family, the team’s work, and refugee issues during masses. We also used the bulletin, the eLetter and our social justice newsletter to keep parishioners informed about the progress of our work, some general information about our family, and the larger issue of refugees.
   7. **Parish Staff Communications**. The pastoral associate updated the parish staff at each Directors and staff meeting about the status of our work. If assistance was needed from another staff member requests were made after the update. But for the most part, the team was able to do things without “burdening” staff.
2. **Privacy**
   1. It is important to remember at all times that you are accompanying a family. Their story is just that, theirs. Team member should respect the family’s right to share information about themselves, and should not share anything without the family’s permission. This can become a bit complicated if the family has serious medical conditions for which the team needs to help identify care. However, finding one or two people to accompany family members to medical appointments rather than a host of people can help keep these issues private.
3. **Media**
   1. All requests from media outlets to talk about the family, even if just to parishioners should be routed first to LSS’s communications director. No one should talk to media about the family without first alerting LSS.
4. **Lessons Learned and Important Things to Know**
   1. **In General**
      1. Follow parishioner energy. One of the greatest aspects of this accompaniment effort has been that there was a lot of natural parishioner energy to get engaged. Staff did not have to “beat the bushes” to find volunteers. And, volunteers came forward from different parts of the parish community – school, religious ed, social justice, liturgy, youth – and from all different age demographics. It has even been a vehicle for newer parishioners to find a community quickly within the parish.
      2. Start with a big team. We had over 100 people sign up to assist with the effort. Although we’ve done well engaging people, probably about 30 are really working on a regular basis with the family. Had we started with a small team of 20, we would be down to probably 2-3 people still working and everyone would be exhausted.
      3. Communicate as much as you can, but know when to be silent. There has been a lot of energy around this project. But not every parishioner is thrilled with it and some are just plain tired of hearing about it. So, it’s important to find a balance in communication – a lot up front but at some point just providing small updates is enough, not all the time.
      4. Find others with similar experiences. It has been helpful to us to identify people who either were refugees, work with refugees, or have social work experience. This allowed us to get answers to some questions when we couldn’t contact LSS. It also helped us take a broader, reflective view of the work we were doing.
      5. Documentation of Identity. LSS will apply for employment authorization for your family. Along with a social security card, this helps provide them identification. You will also want to get driver’s licenses or at least a state ID for each adult. After the family has been in the US one year, the family members may apply for green cards and then, eventually, citizenship.
   2. **Finance**
      1. Lessons Learned
      2. Important Items
   3. **Transportation**
      1. Lessons Learned
      2. Important Items
   4. **Food**
      1. Lessons Learned
      2. Important Items
   5. **Clothing**
      1. Lessons Learned
      2. Important Items
   6. **Housing/Furnishing**
      1. Lessons Learned
      2. Important Items
   7. **Employment**
      1. Lessons Learned
      2. Important Items
   8. **Medical**
      1. Lessons Learned
      2. Important Items
   9. **Education**
      1. Lessons Learned
      2. Important Items
   10. **Welcome**
       1. Lessons Learned
       2. Important Items

**Documents To Attach**

Introductory Email

Agenda from First Meeting (Kick Off)

Survey

LSS packet

Agenda from First Group Meeting

Budget

Team Work Plans

Agenda from Conference Call

I94s

Medicaid Enrollment

TANF Enrollment

WIC Enrollment

1. Since this meeting another family, Kevin Downey and Michele Jolin, have volunteered in Calais as well and might be possible speakers (along with their daughter Clare) in the future. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)