



# Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

## Backgrounder

### Frequently Asked Questions: The Exodus of Families from Central America

#### **Are families crossing the border in addition to unaccompanied immigrant children? How do they end up in the United States?**

Yes, in addition to the influx in unaccompanied immigrant children arrivals, families are crossing the southernmost border at unprecedented rates. They come to the United States from all corners of the world, however the most recent arrivals are Central American, migrating from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador predominately. Recent statistics estimate that 39,000 individuals traveling as families, mostly women with children, have migrated to the United States seeking protection since October of 2013. They make the perilous journey by foot, or as stowaways on freight trains, vulnerable to smugglers and the relentless desert heat.

#### **Why are they fleeing their home countries?**

It is believed that gang-related violence and organized crime in Central America is largely fueling mass exodus to the United States. Due to a powerful drug cartel presence, the homicide rate in Honduras is the highest in the world, at 90.4 per 100,000 according to the Global Study on Homicide 2013. El Salvador and Guatemala were also cited as having some of the highest homicide rates. Central American families fear for their lives and the safety of their children, as many are targets of gang recruitment and/or violence. They flee to the United States seeking safety and freedom from fear.

#### **What happens to families once they get here?**

Historically, when families arrived at the U.S. border, they were apprehended by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and transferred to Berks Family Residential Center in Leesport, PA. However, with only 85 beds, the facility does not have the capacity to meet the staggering increase in family arrivals. 1000s of migrants anxiously wait at CBP stations, exhausted, afraid and in need of immediate medical attention. In response, the U.S. government recently announced its plan to open additional facilities to house families. The first 700-bed detention facility will be located on the grounds of the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Artesia, NM. Families will remain in custody until their immigration case is resolved, whereby some will be allowed to stay, while others will be returned to their country of origin.

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) believes that holding families in immigration detention is inhumane. In 2007, LIRS and the Women's Refugee Commission released *Locking Up Family Values: The Detention of Immigrant Families*, a report which investigated the jailing of immigrant families in the T. Don Hutto Residential Treatment Center in Taylor, TX and the Berks

County Shelter Care Facility in Leesport, PA. It documented disturbing incidents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) failing to meet the basic needs of immigrants in its custody:

- A woman asked for medical attention because her child was suffering from repeated vomiting. The staff said that they would need to see the vomit to believe that her son was sick.
- A mother submitted a request for her son to see a dentist because he had a toothache. After waiting three weeks for an appointment, the dentist pulled his rotten tooth with no anesthesia.
- A pregnant woman did not receive her first prenatal exam until she was seven months pregnant.
- Another pregnant woman recounted that she was given an X-Ray to screen for TB without a lead protective cover even though she told the technician that she was five months pregnant.

LIRS is working with ICE, and an extensive network of social and legal service partners, and advocacy allies to challenge the detainment of families.

### **Are families being given permission to the stay in the United States permanently?**

Currently, there is no legal status being offered to arriving families. All of the families who cross into the United States are still required to abide by U.S. law and must present themselves before immigration court proceedings to determine if they are eligible to remain in the United States. The parents may be eligible for options such as a T-visa, if they can prove they were a victim of human trafficking, a U-visa, if they can prove they were a victim of crime in the United States, or asylum, if they can prove they have been persecuted in their home country. Once one or both parents is granted legal status, their children may also receive a derivative legal status.

### **What are Lutherans doing to help these families?**

LIRS is playing a national advocacy role as well as a service role during this emergency. LIRS believes that detention is an inhumane and fiscally irresponsible default response to migration in the U.S, and we strive to create a more just system that treats every individual with the respect they deserve. We have advocated for the development of alternatives to detention, particularly for vulnerable individuals. LIRS believes that the government could meet both its humanitarian and enforcement obligations by supporting community-based alternatives to immigration detention.

LIRS is piloting an example of these community-based alternatives to detention, whereby our programs welcome individuals as they enter the United States and/or are released from the custody of ICE and await a final decision on their immigration status. The programs provide culturally appropriate case management, ongoing legal assistance, and housing to individuals who demonstrate a need for such services and are eligible to be released from detention.

Drawing upon lesson learned and identified best practices, LIRS is collaborating with ICE, and a strong network of church, social and legal service partners and advocacy allies to push for the release of families into community based alternatives to detention programs. We will be bolstering the services currently offered to meet the increasing demands of arriving families.

### **What can Lutheran congregations and others do to help?**

At this time, Lutherans can mobilize within their communities to help these new arrivals. LIRS is seeking to partner with communities willing to open “Houses of Welcome” for these families. Houses

of Welcome would provide hospitality and support for a group of families as they navigate the immigration legal proceedings. Hospitality is particularly needed on a long term basis, six months to a year, for those families lacking an existing support system in the United States.

Read more about Houses of Welcome at [www.lirs.org/housesofwelcome](http://www.lirs.org/housesofwelcome). To get started contact Matthew Herzberg at LIRS: [mherzberg@lirs.org](mailto:mherzberg@lirs.org) or call 877-291-1061.

**Additional ways to help:**

- Join the #ActOfLove advocacy campaign. [www.lirs.org/actoflove](http://www.lirs.org/actoflove)
- Consider becoming a foster parent through our **Give the Gift of Family** campaign or promoting it at your church or in your community. [www.lirs.org/fostercare](http://www.lirs.org/fostercare)
- Turn an unused parsonage or other property into a **House of Welcome** for migrant families in need. [www.lirs.org/housesofwelcome](http://www.lirs.org/housesofwelcome)
- Support the work of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service: [www.lirs.org/donate](http://www.lirs.org/donate)