



BACKGROUND

The Need for a Community-Based Response to Assist Migrant Families Seeking Refuge

In recent months, Central American families have been crossing the southernmost border of the United States in unprecedented numbers – recent statistics estimate that 39,000 individuals have made the difficult journey with their families since October of 2013, in addition to tens of thousands of Central American unaccompanied children who have also migrated here. Gang-related violence and organized crime are at an all-time high in Central America, and have sparked the mass exodus. Almost all the families are coming from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, countries with staggering homicide rates and powerful gang networks that tout “join or die” mottos.

The influx in family arrivals – particularly mothers with children – has overwhelmed the border. In response to the resulting humanitarian crisis, the Department of Homeland Security recently announced its intentions to hold families in immigration detention facilities. The Berks Family Residential Center in Pennsylvania is the only family facility currently in operation. However, with only 85 beds, the facility does not have the capacity to meet the increasing numbers. The U.S. government plans to open additional facilities, beginning with a 700-bed detention facility located on the grounds of the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Artesia, NM.

As part of our response to the humanitarian crisis, LIRS seeks to identify alternative forms of support for these families in the community. LIRS believes that holding families in detention is inhumane and potentially traumatizing, for prison practices break down family structures, risk separating parents and children, and isolate families from the support and services they desperately need. 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 Texas and the Berks County Shelter Care Facility in Pennsylvania. It documented disturbing incidents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) not only failing to meet the basic needs of migrant families in its custody, but undermining core family systems.

Community-Based Alternatives to Detention

Responding with compassionate action, LIRS is working in partnership with the Evangelical Lutheran church in America and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to mobilize concerned volunteers, Lutheran social ministry organizations, congregations and organizations to offer a more holistic and resounding welcome to these arriving families. We seek to welcome families by building upon our community based alternatives to detention model with expanded case management, housing and support appropriate for families.

LIRS’ existing community based model is designed to welcome individuals released from the custody of ICE whether they are in the early stages of the legal process or awaiting a final decision on their immigration status. The program provides culturally appropriate case management, ongoing legal assistance, and housing to individuals who demonstrate a need for such services. We are currently piloting the community based model in seven hub communities nationwide. These communities include;



Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

Austin/San Antonio, Texas; Boston, Massachusetts; Chicago, Illinois; Elizabeth, NJ/New York, NY; Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota; Seattle/Tacoma, Washington; and Tucson/Phoenix, Arizona.

The existing LIRS community support model will be an important source of training and technical support for new Houses of Welcome. LIRS will facilitate mentoring and the transfer of knowledge and experience. Current LIRS partners in the community support program provide communal housing to vulnerable migrant families as they wait for the decision in their immigration legal processes. Our partners provide this safe place to live for a period of 6 months to 1 year, provide time for migrants to stabilize from their traumatic journey and adjust to life in the United States. In addition to meeting immediate needs, community support sites refer residents to appropriate services including support, case management services, physical and mental health services, employment/vocational counseling, legal services and ESL classes. Families benefit from mutual support from other residents and the larger church and concerned community. The goal is for residents to leave the community support program with the confidence and support needed to thrive as an integrated member of their new community.

Core elements of the community support approach are highlighted below. The desirable characteristics for a House of Welcome are:

- Up to 1 year of free housing to families
- Up to 1 year of assistance with food and other basic necessities for the families
- Appropriate family and communal living space with access to a private bedroom, communal kitchen, bathroom, living/dining room, phone, and laundry machine
- Case management support from social service organization with appropriate expertise
- Access to low-cost or pro bono legal services
- Spanish language capacity
- Active engagement and support of local congregations and volunteers.

Desirable characteristics for a community intending to organize a House of Welcome are:

- Located in one of LIRS' existing 7 hub communities or in a new community with a strong Central American migrant presence and Spanish language capacity
- Located in a safe neighborhood, close to reliable public transportation and public schools
- Located within a reasonable driving distance of an immigration court and in close proximity to free or low-cost immigration attorneys
- Thriving community and spiritual centers
- Strong partnership with local congregation or community group who can provide volunteers, mentors and additional friendship and support
- Proximity to low-cost medical and mental health providers and other appropriate social services

This approach has enjoyed enormous success in servicing individuals. For example, Sarah's Oasis in St. Paul, MN has provided shelter and supportive services to over 600 immigrant women since 1996, many of whom are survivors of violence, abuse and torture. Sarah's Oasis meets pressing physical needs, while also fostering spiritual and emotional healing through communal living and access to supportive services.



Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

Reflecting on her time at Sarah's, one resident shared, "We are from different countries and we speak different languages, and every day we learn from each other."

With the large influx of Central American families, we are exploring *new sites of hospitality and support*. For the majority of families with community connections and an identified place to stay with friends or family, there is a need for case management and help in building ties in the local community. For a smaller number of families (estimated at perhaps several hundred) with no relatives or community ties in the US, housing and other basic sustenance are needed alongside case management. ICE will not release families from detention without prearranged housing. Consequently, we are calling upon volunteers, congregations, Lutheran social ministry organizations, and local organizations to help identify and leverage untapped community resources and transform vacant or underutilized community spaces into a House of Welcome.

Together, we can respond compassionately to the families fleeing violence and seeking protection in this country. We look forward to collaborating with you and providing hospitality and a compassionate response to brothers and sisters in need.