

## LSS/NCA Refugee & Immigrant Services Program

Refugees are individuals who have fled their home countries due to a fear of persecution based on race, religion, national origin, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Refugees often flee from their homes in the middle of the night, having very little time to think about where they'll eventually be going and not knowing whether they'll ever go back home.

The needs of refugees and displaced people have long concerned the Lutheran community in general and specifically those in Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia. Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area's (LSS/NCA) Refugee and Immigrant Services (RIS) program began more than three decades ago to assist the resettlement of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao refugees who fled their home countries after the fall of Saigon in April of 1975. The program was intended to be brief in duration and was started simply to coordinate church sponsorship of these primarily Vietnamese refugees.

In 1979 conditions in Vietnam and the region had deteriorated so severely that refugees were fleeing in small boats from Vietnam across the Mekong from Laos and through the killing fields of Cambodia. Many lives were lost during the flight. The refugee program was expanded to reunite families and to provide a new life for those who could not return home or faced long years in horrible refugee camps in countries hostile to their presence.

As the world struggled to understand and help in regional conflicts, the refugee program became increasingly diverse. During such times, the program assisted in LSS/NCA's resettlement of refugees from Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and South East Asia.

Refugees from Haiti and Cuba also sought refuge in our area. Although these groups were assisted in small numbers at first, there was a dramatic increase following the Mariel Bay boat lift. Likewise, refugees from Iran and Iraq changed the needs and response to refugees and their successful resettlement.

After decades of services, RIS is obviously no longer a temporary program, but rather a critical lifeline for people who are forced to flee their homelands and who are not able to seek safety in neighboring countries. Each year RIS serves more than 300 refugees, asylees, and victims of trafficking from over 50 countries. The program provides professional, culturally competent services to a diverse population throughout Washington Metropolitan Area. And the neighbors we serve enrich our community with their dignity, culture, wisdom, and strength of character.

### ***RIS Mission Statement:***

*"We seek to empower refugee and immigrant community members to support each other, to better access community services and to become self-sufficient and active members of their communities."*



# SPONSORING A REFUGEE

Co-Sponsorship is a commitment from a community group to assist with the resettlement of a refugee individual or family through an organized contribution of in-kind goods, services and financial assistance. It is a transformational experience that will leave a life-long impression on your congregation as well as the refugee family you sponsor. Co-sponsorship is an opportunity not only to bring your congregation together in a very unique way, but also to be a part of a refugee's story of hope, resilience, and rebuilding.

As you welcome a new refugee family to the United States you will be helping them gain self-confidence, become acculturated to our community, and become self-sufficient more quickly and with fewer obstacles than a refugee navigating a new community alone. As your relationship develops you will find meaningful change in the lives of the refugees you serve and also within your congregation.

Some of the core activities that Co-Sponsors are involved with include:

- Meeting a family at the airport
- Providing safe, sanitary and furnished housing
- Providing food or food allowance
- Providing necessary clothing
- Applying for Social Security Cards within 7 working days.
- Enrolling children in schools
- Helping adults learn English
- Helping employable adults become job ready and find employment

Before a refugee family arrives, LSS/NCA would come to your congregation and train committed members on best practices in co-sponsorship, including cultural orientation and creating benchmarks for success. Training and communication will be ongoing throughout your co-sponsorship experience and you will never be alone assisting the refugee family. That's why there's a "co" in the co-sponsorship! LSS/NCA is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the needs of a family are met.



*One of our co-sponsors welcoming a refugee family at the airport*