

Bethesda Friends Meeting – P&SJ Committee
Report to MfB asking the Meeting to Sponsor our Refugee Initiative
May 7, 2017

The purpose of this report is to inform Bethesda Friends Meeting (BFM) about and obtain its sponsorship for the Peace and Social Justice Committee's (P&SJ) initiative to help refugees as described below. Obtaining the Meeting's support for this project is desirable and also necessary because sponsorship by an official organization is required for the participation we are proposing.

Recent changes in the government's approach and attitude towards refugees have horrified many of us. Banning of Syrian and other refugees, negative talk, and other actions have made refugees feel that they are not welcome in this country. Many of us in BFM have wondered how we can support refugees and show our concern for their welfare. How can we be part of a nationwide movement to push back against this negative attitude and treatment of refugees?

Under the auspices of BFM's Peace and Social Justice Committee, a Helping Refugees Group (HRG) was formed to explore and develop a viable plan that would allow us to move forward. The HRG started by contacting three local groups (Chevy Chase Presbyterian Church, Sandy Spring Friends Meeting, and River Road Unitarian Universalist Church) in order to learn about their experiences working with refugee families. We also investigated the various refugee umbrella groups available to us to find out how they operate.

After much discussion, the HRG decided that our best approach would be to work with Lutheran Social Services (LSS). Of the available umbrella organizations, we were able to get the most information about LSS. They offer a highly structured program, including training sessions for volunteers, and are generally viewed positively by those working with them. Two other umbrella organizations, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Montgomery County Interfaith Refugee Resettlement Neighbors (MCIRRN) were considered. The IRC does not seem to function as well as the LSS, and the MCIRRN appears to be more in the business of assisting refugee resettlement agencies rather than individual support organizations.

The LSS program is described in the accompanying handout. There are four possible levels of involvement each requiring certain commitments. The HRG chose Level 2 because it involves working directly with a family but without requiring any specific financial commitment (Level 1 mandates paying the rent for the family). We would be expected to furnish and stock an apartment, welcome them to their new home, and commit to providing additional support in areas of our choosing, such as transportation, grocery shopping, teaching English, finding jobs, and cultural assimilation. After deciding which tasks we are willing to help with, we would work under the supervision and in partnership with a Case Manager and Job Developer assigned to the family to help meet the family's needs. LSS would remain the primary sponsor of the family; HRG and other Meeting members would provide supplemental voluntary help.

We feel that the HRG has a core group of volunteers who are eager to participate in this venture and can meet the support needs required. Debbie Friese and Lee Ingram, co-coordinators of HRG, would be in charge of organizing the effort and liaising with LSS whenever necessary. At the moment, the HRG has nine active members who can assist in areas such as education (ESL tutoring), transportation for shopping and medical appointments, recruiting and scheduling of volunteers, and cultural awareness. We even have one member who speaks some Arabic and another who has extensive experience in Afghanistan. We also would hope to pull in other members of our Meeting to help with various tasks once the family has arrived and the needs are more clear.

Although Level 2 would not require any financial commitment from BFM (the refugee families are connected to Social Services such as food stamps, and the rent is covered by LSS), it is possible that down the road we may want to set up a small contingency fund. We have found from our discussions with other church groups that the volunteers often end up supplementing the family's resources by helping with utilities, setting up WiFi, taking them out to dinner, providing Target gift cards, and in general supplementing their clothing and food costs. According to our church contacts, much of this has come willingly out of the volunteers' pockets. Since P&SJ has already designated the June Social Concerns Box specifically for assistance for a potential refugee family, we believe that there are already signs of interest within our Meeting for providing supplemental financial support.

It is important to understand some of the challenges BFM would face as we undertake this project. The wait for a family through LSS would probably be at least five or six months. The family may be from any of a number of refugee groups, so varied cultural knowledge will be necessary. Once a family arrives, bureaucratic snafus will undoubtedly be encountered. And perhaps most important, although the "authorities" say that the goal is for a family to be independent in six months, experience from other groups tells us that 18 months is more realistic. Since BFM would not want to abandon a family mid-stream, we could expect to be involved with the family for quite a while. Ultimately we would hope to shift from a supporting role to a more social relationship.

As we wait for a family, there are ways we can keep the momentum going. BFM has already donated funds to send two Syrian boys to Quaker camp this summer. We can educate ourselves about refugee cultures. We might institute monthly action initiatives such as a First Mondays program about refugee issues. We could organize collection drives for furniture and clothing, attend area events focused on refugees, and continue to learn from the experiences of other churches sponsoring families.

We feel that the benefits from sponsoring a refugee family would outweigh the costs. Our church contacts have communicated how appreciative these families are because of the essential support. Their volunteers have enjoyed having a relationship with the family and talk about the pleasure of helping them learn about their new country, taking the children to the park, and doing activities with the family. Our hope is that BFM will join in on this worthwhile project.

Debbie Friese and Lee Ingram, Co-Coordiators of HRG