

World Refugee Day celebrated June 20

Catholic Charities accepts leading role

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DUBUQUE — June 20 is World Refugee Day. For many, this means remembering the courage, strength and determination it took to flee their home and escape persecution, conflict and violence.



For Catholic Charities, it means celebrating the many individuals the agency is fortunate to help settle into a new life and community and reunite with family in eastern Iowa. In recent years, Catholic Charities' refugee resettlement services have expanded exponentially. In the last year alone, resettlements have increased three-fold, growing from 35 in 2012 to 104 in 2013.

Merely five years ago, that resettlement number was five individuals. Catholic

Charities is the only provider of refugee resettlement services in eastern Iowa, and only one of two agencies providing this service in the state.

Becoming self-sufficient quickly is absolutely critical for refugees entering the United States. Upon arrival they are granted \$1,125. This amount is typically enough to cover a deposit and one month of rent. While they are eligible for refugee benefits, including cash, medical and food stamps assistance, these benefits are only available to them for eight months.

Refugees also arrive in the United States in debt for their travel expenses, which can amount to thousands of dollars. Payment on this debt begins within six months of their arrival. This is a time period of assimilation, cultural changes, and hard work, but also a blessing of safety for their families.

Resettlement process

Catholic Charities holds a contract with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops through Migration and Refugee Services to provide resettlement services in Iowa. In recent years, primary locations for resettlement requests have been Waterloo, Columbus Junction and Marshalltown. To a lesser degree, there have also been placements in Cedar Rapids and Iowa City. Since the Davenport Diocese does not have a resettlement program,

Catholic Charities has been working in cooperation with Davenport Diocesan staff when resettlements occur in that diocese. Currently, approximately 70 percent of the resettlements are of Burmese ethnic origin, coming here from camps in Malaysia and Thailand.

Upon receiving a resettlement request notice, a Catholic Charities case manager contacts an "anchor relative" — an immediate family member believed to be living in the community where the refugee wishes to resettle. (S)he confirms that the anchor relative is willing to receive this family member, offering support in the process. The case manager then works with the anchor relative to prepare needed items and arrangements to welcome the refugees. Upon arrival, the case manager picks the refugees up at the airport and reunites them with their anchor relatives.

After a few days, the case manager visits again to confirm that the refugees are housed in adequate and safe conditions, even if it is temporary, and that they are aware of emergency services. This meeting begins the process of integrating refugees into their new country and culture.

The case manager shares customs and laws, helps them understand how to use basic household items, such as washers/dryers, ovens, lights, toilets ... After explaining how to be a good neighbor, the

case manager visits every two weeks to prepare the refugee to become self-sufficient. During this time, she assists the refugee in applying for a Social Security card, finding housing, applying for temporary refugee benefits, seeking medical care, enrolling in English language classes, finding a job, enrolling children in school and daycare, overcoming culture shock, learning the public transportation system, and learning about U.S. currency, local laws and norms and more ... all with a language barrier — and all within 90 days.

Help needed

How can you help? Catholic Charities services are limited to a period of 90 days, but the reality is that families need much more support than what can be provided in this time period. If you are interested in assisting a family assimilate to your community, please contact Lori Williams, program director, at 515-296-2759.

Opportunities may involve donations or volunteering your time to provide ethnically appropriate meals, transportation, and assistance with orientation to the community. As always, we welcome your prayers for our refugee families. Stay in touch and learn more about Catholic Charities and our Refugee Resettlement program online at www.CatholicCharitiesDubuque.org.