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Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services

CO-SPONSORSHIP MANUAL for CONGREGATIONS

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“... I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me... for just as you did it to one of the least of these who are my sisters and brothers, you did it unto me.”

(Matthew 25:35,40)

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Welcome to the ministry of refugee resettlement. In opening your door and your hearts to refugees, you are indeed carrying out the work of God who watches over strangers. (Psalm 146.9) We hope that you too will discover the rich blessing many other congregations have received in the challenging and joyful work of co-sponsoring a refugee family.

We encourage you to envision your co-sponsorship as an integral part in the process of enabling refugees to achieve **early self-sufficiency**. It is important to think always in terms of lending a hand up, never a hand out. Refugees are people who have been made dependent by circumstances outside of their control. The experience of working and doing things for themselves can help them to gain self-confidence and empower them to take control of their lives again.

This manual is designed to provide you with the information you need to embark on a successful refugee resettlement.

An Introduction to Refugee Resettlement

1. Who is a refugee?

Refugees are a special group of people. By U.S. and international definition, they are people who have left their home country because they were persecuted or because they had legitimate fears that they would be persecuted. They were singled out by leaders within their own country for abuse because of their religious beliefs, political views, or racial or ethnic background. Having left their homeland, they can no longer return without facing persecution.

When refugees flee their country they place their lives and their future at the mercy of any nearby nation who is willing to take them in and provide safe haven. Most refugee families spend years warehoused in compounds euphemistically called “refugee camps”... waiting for an opportunity to begin their lives over again. During the last ten years an average of 15 million people have lived as refugees in refugee “camps” in remote places around the world. Of these 15 million people, only about 80,000 will be allowed to resettle in the United States in any given year.¹

2. How Are Refugees Selected to Come to the United States?

Refugees approved for resettlement in the United States have been processed in a variety of ways. They have been interviewed several times before being granted refugee status by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR). After applying for admission to the United States, they have been interviewed again and subjected to background checks regarding former political or criminal activity and a medical exam to be sure they carry no communicable diseases.

¹ *The Sponsor Guide*. Exodus World Service, Ithaca IL

3. What is Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services (IRIS)?

Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services (IRIS) is a non-profit agency whose mission is to help refugees and other displaced people establish new lives, regain hope, and contribute to the vitality of Connecticut's communities. IRIS provides resettlement services, employment counseling, and support services to approximately 200 refugees a year. It is a program of Episcopal Social Service of the Diocese of Connecticut and a local affiliate of Episcopal Migration Ministries and the Immigration and Refugee Program of Church World Service. IRIS is located at 235 Nicoll Street, New Haven, Connecticut 06511. We are open Monday through Friday, 9am to 5 pm. We can be reached by phone at (203) 562-2095, Fax (203) 562-1798 or e-mail, info@irisct.org. Please visit our website at www.irisct.org

4. How will Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services work with our congregation?

IRIS will work with your congregation both before and after your refugee family arrives. Our **congregation co-sponsorship coordinator** will help you to organize and train a core group to oversee your resettlement. She can also give a talk or sermon to introduce your congregation to the process. We will notify you of the scheduled date and time of your family's arrival and accompany you to the airport if you wish. (Please be aware that IRIS has no control over when or even whether a refugee actually arrives. In rare cases, a family may be turned away for health reasons or even change their mind about emigrating at the last moment.)

Once your family has arrived, you will begin working with an IRIS **case worker**. Shortly after arrival you will be asked to accompany your refugee family to the IRIS office for an orientation session. Your case worker will then visit your refugee family at home within the first two weeks to do an in-take interview, provide general resettlement counseling and answer your questions. The case manager is always available for telephone consultations, which are often frequent during the initial weeks. Since the case worker is not in the office at all times, a 1-2 day response may be expected. However, other IRIS staff may be able to help you during working hours and a 24 hour emergency system is in place. We request that you maintain contact with your case worker as the resettlement progresses, especially regarding changes in living situation or employment. We have found that regular contact with the case worker makes it easier for us to cope with emergencies, should they arise.

In addition, if your refugee family is enrolled in the Early Self-Sufficiency Program, you will be working with the **volunteer coordinator**. She will introduce you to the Program, teach you how to fill out volunteer forms, and come to collect the forms.

5. What is the Early Self-Sufficiency Program?

The **Early Self-Sufficiency Program** is a federal Match Grant program designed to help refugees gain early self-sufficiency **WITHOUT ACCESSING PUBLIC CASH ASSISTANCE OBTAINED THROUGH EITHER STATE OR**



FEDERAL AGENCIES. We work through this program to resettle refugee families who have at least one potential wage-earner. After years of working with refugees, we at IRIS are convinced that fostering early self-sufficiency is the best way to help refugees succeed in America and regain a sense of dignity and control over their lives. The Early Self-Sufficiency Program provides IRIS with funds to match volunteer hours and in-kind donations (food, furniture, clothing or other goods) given to help any refugee enrolled in the program achieve self-sufficiency. IRIS depends on this Match Grant funding to meet our expenses and support those refugees who are not lucky enough to be sponsored by a congregation.

About Congregation Co-Sponsorship

6. What are the **responsibilities** of Congregation Co-Sponsorship?

Church World Service identifies three essential responsibilities of the refugee sponsor. The first responsibility is that of **helper**, assisting the refugee with initial material needs and helping the refugee achieve economic self-sufficiency. The second is that of **friend**, providing the crucial emotional support and guidance needed by the refugee to meet the challenges of overcoming great personal losses and making the major adjustments to society. The third is that of **advocate**, insuring just and decent treatment for the newcomer in this society—without discrimination against other groups—and promoting respect for the cultural heritage and identity of the refugee.

The Congregation Co-Sponsor signs an agreement to provide the following core services to a refugee family for a minimum of four months to help them become self-sufficient, contributing members of their new community. The core services will be provided fully when the refugee arrives and offered on a model of declining services once the refugee begins to work.

- 1) Arrange to meet the refugee at the nearest major airport and provide transportation to living accommodations.
- 2) Provide the initial temporary housing and help the refugee obtain permanent housing; provide the basic furnishing and other needed household goods.
- 3) Provide food, or a food allowance, as well as other basic living needs.
- 4) Provide basic clothing for the refugee, appropriate to the climate.
- 5) Assist the refugee in receiving an initial health exam within a month of arrival. Assist the refugee with known health problems to secure follow-up medical treatment within one week of arrival.
- 6) Assist the refugee in applying for a Social Security card.
- 7) Help find a job for each employable refugee; enroll refugee in job training or on-the-job training as necessary.
- 8) Enroll the refugee in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes; assist with school registration for refugee children.
- 9) Help the refugee in becoming oriented in the community; show how to shop, use public transportation, use emergency telephone numbers, understand local customs and laws, obtain a driver's license, life and health insurance, manage banking, etc.
- 10) Encourage the refugee to repay the interest-free travel loan extended to provide transportation to this country. Provide our agency with an updated address, should the refugee move.

11) Maintain contact with our agency staff and complete volunteer forms.

7. What are the **limits** to co-sponsorship?

Congregation co-sponsorship DOES NOT require the following:

- 1) The co-sponsor to pay for any travel expenses for the refugee to reach you. The refugee is responsible for repaying his or her travel loan.
- 2) The co-sponsor to be liable for debts or bills the refugee may incur.
- 3) The co-sponsor to be responsible for the refugee's activities in the area of civil or criminal activities. Welcoming a refugee carries the same legal considerations that welcoming a visiting preacher, prospective or active member, or community group to the congregation. The refugee is solely responsible in the area of civil or criminal activities.

Planning and Organizing

8. What are the **first steps**?

If your congregation is considering refugee co-sponsorship, it is important to *identify a **contact person(s)**, to generate a broad base of support* within the congregation, and to *procure the necessary funding*. We have found that congregations that organize and publicize their efforts well seldom have difficulty raising the funds necessary for refugee resettlement. We do not recommend drawing from the congregation's operating budget. Instead, you can hold fund-raising events (concerts, movies, dinners, speakers on refugee/international issues, etc.) or solicit one-time contributions from the congregation or community through letters and appeals.

9. What is the job of the Contact Person?

This person is the primary contact for the refugee, Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services, and the congregation community, and will coordinate the overlapping activities of the other committee members. The **contact person** will sign the co-sponsorship agreement. He or she will be part of the welcoming committee at the airport and will check in with the refugee regularly until the family is securely established in their surroundings. The contact person has primary decision-making responsibility. Committee members will make regular reports to the contact person who will be responsible for maintaining contact with the IRIS case manager.

10. What is the Core Committee?

The **core committee** takes on the responsibility for providing the core services of co-sponsorship to their refugee family and maintains communication with the contact person. We recommend that the core committee consist of members responsible for each of the following: employment, housing, clothing/furnishings, finance, ESL/education, health, acculturation, hospitality and transportation. (It sometimes works to have fewer members of the core committee, so long as it is clear who is responsible for each of the core services.)

A. Employment

The employment person is responsible for locating appropriate jobs for all refugees in the family who are able to work. Since early self-sufficiency is the goal of resettlement, early employment should be the first priority. The search for employment should begin before the refugee arrives and be followed through on a consistent basis so that once the Social Security card is issued, work can begin.

Refugees must be taken to the Office of Social Security in the nearest city to apply for their Social Security cards within the first few days after their arrival. It normally takes 10 days to three weeks to receive a card. Legal “on the books” employment cannot begin without a card. Be sure that the application is for an **unrestricted social security card**. A refugee’s card should NOT contain the notation “Valid for Work Only With INS Authorization.”

The immediate objective is full-time, year-round employment with benefits. In some rural communities, it may be necessary to find employment in the nearest larger town or city. Part-time, seasonal, and “under the table” jobs may be easier to locate, but they often turn into liabilities because they reduce the opportunity for self-sufficiency. **Remember that Medicaid and Food Stamps do run out.** It is appropriate to use a two-month from arrival deadline for achievement of full-time employment. If you have not been able to locate full-time employment in this time, please contact us for help. IRIS has an experienced employment counselor on staff. Although she does not routinely conduct job searches for congregation-sponsored refugees, she is available to offer suggestions and assistance, especially for congregations within commuting distance of the New Haven area.

Because many refugees arrive from cultures where lifetime employment is the norm and the concept of upward mobility is foreign, it is essential that you explain clearly that this will be the *first of many jobs* that they have before they find one suitable to their background or desires. If further vocational training or academic education are desired, it should be encouraged, but on a part-time schedule that does not interfere with work.

B. Housing

The housing person is responsible for finding appropriate temporary housing when the refugee(s) arrive and suitable permanent housing within the first month after arrival. Many congregations have found it helpful to house refugees with a congregant for the first days or weeks after arrival. This offers the refugee family extra support in their early adjust to American life. It also prevents your congregation from having to lease an apartment prior to their arrival. Since it is impossible to predict or even guarantee the arrival of a refugee family, your congregation will want to avoid taking on financial responsibility for housing until after they are here.

As soon as possible, however, your refugee family should be moved to their own apartment. This helps prevent their developing a dependent relationship with their hosts and communicates *your confidence in their ability to function independently*. It is important that you locate housing that is safe, sanitary, **accessible**, and **affordable** to a family whose income may be limited during their first year or so in this country. If you live in a rural area without public transportation, you may need to find housing in the same town as the refugee’s job.

Once housing is procured, the housing person will need to arrange for the lease and utilities hook-ups. Security deposits may be made refundable to the congregation. If a telephone is provided, we strongly recommend starting with *local service only*. Phone cards are an effective way of helping manage the expense of long-distance and international calls.

C. Clothing/Household furnishings

The clothing/household furnishings person is responsible for procuring clothing, furniture and household goods for the refugee family. (A check-list of items often needed for setting up house is included among the worksheets at the end of this Manual.) Donations of furniture and household goods can be pledged in advance of the refugee(s)' arrival. Unless you are personally able to repair them, it is a good idea to accept only items in good condition! You should hold off on clothing donations until after you can determine the needs and sizes of your family. Some clothing you will need to purchase new (socks and underwear), but providing too much new clothing or other goods may establish an expectation that your congregation cannot and should not continue to fulfill. Most congregations find that they are deluged with donated items and that their expenditures on clothing, household goods and furnishings is negligible. Indeed, it is a good idea to have in mind a Goodwill or thrift store to which you can give donated clothes and household goods you can't use!

D. Finance

The finance person is responsible for overseeing the expenditure of the resettlement funds and introducing the refugee to budgeting, credit, the banking system and taxes. It will be important that refugees learn about the need to build a credit history in America and the risks of relying on credit to pay bills.

The finance person is responsible for determining whether the congregation can provide a **food budget** to support the refugee(s) until they are on their feet or whether it will be necessary to apply to the Connecticut Department of Social Services (DSS) that serves your community for Food Stamps. If it is necessary to use Food Stamps, you must be sure to apply *before the refugee begins employment*. (This can be done at the same time you apply for Medicaid; see Health section.) Be aware that DSS can count any Church Support (including rent subsidies) against qualifying refugees for Food Stamps.

E. ESL/Education

The Education Person is responsible for overseeing education and English classes for all members of the family. This includes registering children for school and keeping in contact with teachers regarding their progress. If the children's parent does not speak English, the Education Person may be the contact person for the school system. Schools are mandated by law to provide ESL and special assistance for all children who do not speak English fluently.

Equally important is providing opportunities for adults in the family to learn and practice English. Learning English is absolutely essential to the refugee(s)' independence. In fact, even refugees who already speak English will discover that American English is different from that which is practiced in other parts of the world. There several alternatives for ESL classes for adults: ESL classes are often available (day

and/or evenings) through the local public school system; Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) operates free of charge in many communities in Connecticut; members of your congregation may be able to provide formal ESL classes or supplement other classes with frequent conversation and friendly visits. As self-sufficiency is the primary goal, however, ESL classes should be scheduled so as not to conflict with employment.

F. Health

The health person is responsible for overseeing medical and dental care for the refugee(s). Refugees are eligible for eight months of **Medicaid** provided that they are income-qualified when they apply. It is essential that this application is made *before the refugee begins employment*. Within the first week after arrival, refugees must be taken to the Office of Social Security to apply for a Social Security Card. They should then be taken to the Connecticut Department of Social Services (DSS) to apply for Medicaid. (They will need to bring their I94 cards and a receipt indicating that they have applied for their Social Security cards. It's a good idea to call first and find out whether your local DSS requires appointments or wants the refugee to actually have a social security card before applying for Medicaid. Your IRIS case worker may be familiar with DSS policies in your area.)

Refugees have been tested overseas to be sure that they carry no communicable diseases (including HIV). However, the Center for Disease Control requires that they receive a health screening here within the first month after their arrival. This can be performed by a local doctor or at a hospital clinic. Many hospitals have translation services (which must be arranged for when you make the appointment); if yours does not, you will need to arrange to bring a translator to the Health Screening. Standardized Health Assessment forms will be provided by IRIS for use by the practitioner. School age children must have proper immunization before they can enroll for school. The School will provide you with necessary forms.

Many refugees arrive in need of serious dental work. You will need to locate a dentist who accepts Medicaid payments. Sometimes refugees arrive with or develop health conditions that require frequently scheduled doctor visits. The health person and the transportation will need good communication to be sure appointments are scheduled and kept.

The Health Person should inform IRIS of any non-routine medical proceedings, including abortion, vasectomy, tubal ligation, or any major surgery for appropriate culturally supportive counseling.

G. Acculturation/ Hospitality

Introducing the refugee family to our complex American culture will involve many members of the congregation as well as the co-sponsorship committee. During the first few weeks there should be daily contact to make sure that all is OK and answer acculturation questions as they arise. Friendly visits and outings are among the most important ways we show the refugee family that they are welcome. However, scheduling visits and outings with your refugee family can become a logistical nightmare if you don't have an organized "central clearing house" for keeping their appointments. This can be a large calendar in the refugee's home or kept by an appointed member of the committee (often the transportation person). Emphasize to your congregation that NO

ONE IS TO SCHEDULE EVEN A BRIEF OUTING with your family without checking and making a note on the calendar!

The IRIS case manager is skilled at counseling in acculturation issues. The initial intake interview with the refugee covers many topics that have been found to be of common interest to most refugees. You are encouraged to call to discuss other issues as they come up.

Some of the areas of American culture that refugees will need to understand include:

- New Surroundings: Refugees should be encouraged to visit community attractions and resources on their own. “Getting out of the house” is vital to establishing connection with their new community. A public library card can be a meaningful first source of community contact. Recreation and cultural activities should be made part of orientation.
- Grocery: Go with the family at least the first time to buy their food at a nearby grocery. Show them how to shop economically, how to weigh vegetables, how to check out. They may need to be instructed to ask for certain items such as cigarettes, rather than go behind the counter to take them. Show how to return bottles for deposit refund. Take the family to an ethnic food store periodically to be sure that they have the specialty items they need.
- Laundry: Show the family where they can wash clothes at a nearby Laundromat. Give careful instruction on selective washing, temperature, timing, and soap use. Show how to use a moneychanger.
- Post Office: They will be interested in writing letters overseas as well as within the United States. Explain air letters and stamps, how to purchase them and how to use them. Show them where to find the nearest mailbox.
- Telephone: The refugee may need a phone to communicate with the Contact Person and a translator. You may need to teach the refugee how to use the phone. Calling cards are a good alternative to unlimited long distance calling privileges. Impress upon the refugee the expense involved and encourage the use of mail (or E-mail) for long-distance communication.
- Identification: The CT Motor Vehicle Department issues photo IDs for a \$10 fee. Refugees must have their I-94 card, Passport (if available), Social Security card, and a letter received at their address to show Connecticut residency.

H. Transportation

The transportation person is responsible for arranging the refugee’s transportation until the family is able to do this independently. When public transportation is available, he or she should introduce the refugee family to the system quickly and encourage them to use it. Both the transportation person and the refugee should maintain copies of public transportation schedules.

Many of the refugee’s transportation needs cannot be met through public transportation, especially in rural or many suburban towns. In the first few months the transportation person will need to arrange for congregation members to ferry the refugees to jobs, appointments, and shopping. This will require good organizational skills and a list of volunteers who have reliable cars. It will also require a back-up system for the inevitable times transportation plans go awry. It is essential that the location of the

refugee's housing and employment not require long-term reliance on the congregation for their transportation needs.

Some refugees will be interested in acquiring a car. Unless someone in the congregation is able to donate a used automobile, the refugee will need to work with the finance person to develop a plan for purchasing a car, maintaining it, and arranging for automobile insurance. In many cases, the transportation person will need to arrange for driving instruction and help the refugee prepare for his or her driver's license. The CT Department of Motor Vehicles may have written tests available in your refugee's native language. However, he/she will still need to learn the information in the CT Motor Vehicles Drivers' Manual and be able to read and interpret common signs. The road test is administered in English. A translator may be present to explain the process before the exam begins but may not be present during the actual test. Getting a driving license can be a trying ordeal, and many refugees do not pass it on their first or second attempt.

11. How do we prepare for the arrival of the refugee?

WAITING FOR ARRIVAL:

Once you have signed a co-sponsorship agreement, there is usually a waiting time of one to three months before the refugee arrives. Unless there is a problem or change in the refugee's status, we will not receive any updates on the refugee during this waiting time. The arrival date of the refugee can NEVER BE GUARANTEED. Delays may evolve due to illness, visa availability, processing problems (often due to local civil strife or intergovernmental political constraints).

IRIS generally receives notification of the final expected arrival time five days in advance. We will forward that information to you immediately. However, you should be aware that sometimes refugee arrivals are scheduled on considerably shorter notice. Committee members involved in meeting new refugees need to be flexible and prepared for a possible last minute scramble. It's also important to recognize that refugees can change their minds about coming here. On rare occasions, a refugee scheduled for arrival will not show up. These "No-Shows" can be a stressful experience for a waiting congregation, and we seldom receive advance notice or even an explanation. If this happens, we urge you to open your hearts to the next available family waiting for sponsorship.

THE DAY OF ARRIVAL:

A small reception group, including a translator, should meet the flight and bring the refugee to their new or temporary home. Remember that the refugee will be both tired and fearful; this is not the time for a gala welcoming party. Instead, offer the refugee something simple to eat and drink and a chance to rest.

We offer a few PRACTICAL TIPS FOR MEETING REFUGEES:

- 1) Call ahead of time to confirm the flight's arrival time.
- 2) Plan to wait. Entry procedures take 1-3 hours, so bring patience and perhaps a good book.
- 3) Come equipped with a sign bearing the refugee's name in large letters.
- 4) Bring warm clothing if a refugee from a warm climate arrives during winter months.

The Committee may also wish to provide each refugee with an arrival packet containing the name and telephone of translator, contact person, and I.R.M; a small cash stipend, including bills and change; and a map of the town, highlighting the home, congregation and safe routes for walking.

POST ARRIVAL:

Refugees learn that Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services will assist in their resettlement before they depart for the United States, but they do not learn about their congregation co-sponsors until they arrive here. It is important to meet with the adult refugees and a translator shortly after their arrival to explain that your role as a co-sponsor is to provide transitional assistance until the refugee is self-sufficient. At this meeting, co-sponsors will also have the opportunity to discover what expectations the refugees may have for their new life in the United States. It is important for both refugees and co-sponsors to confront and clarify any misconceptions or miscommunication early in the resettlement process.

Set a meeting with the Core Committee within ten days or two weeks after the family has arrived. Evaluate what has happened so far. Interview each refugee to develop the required Resettlement Plan. Make sure the Contact Person is not shouldering too many responsibilities.

Visit with the refugee family regularly. Record all contacts in a Case Note Log and complete the Match Grant Volunteer forms.

12. How can we help refugees to reunite with their families overseas?

Many times refugees will have family members they would like to bring into the country. They should contact their case worker at IRIS to file an Affidavit of Relationship (AOR).

Some Sensitive Areas of Sponsoring

Evangelism:

It is important to realize that religion is a fundamental part of one's identity and that rushed or pressured religious "conversions" can be disastrous both psychologically and emotionally for refugees. Instead, put them in touch with others of their nationality and faith and assure them that your friendship and support are not dependent on their involvement in your congregation.

The Refugees Leave:

A significant percentage of refugees choose to move from their initial resettlement community. This may happen within days of their arrival or within the first few months. They may move to join relatives or friends, to pursue an avenue of economic support, or to live in a particular kind of climate. Refugees are free to make this choice. While it may disrupt your plans or even appear to be a bad choice for the family, we must view it as a sign of their own independence and permit them to go. It

should not be viewed as a failure on your part. One of the best antidotes is to sponsor another family soon!

Working Towards Independence:

Refugees may tend to become overly dependent upon you as co-sponsor. From the day they arrive you will need to work toward independence. You can help by:

1. Helping them to work toward **economic self-sufficiency** as quickly as possible. This is the fundamental goal of co-sponsorship.
2. Working to develop **healthy two-way friendships** rather than dependent ones.
3. Taking the time to **listen and learn** from them. Their culture, food, language and experiences are fascinating; you will benefit and show them respect while they will gain a sense of dignity and pride in talking about what has been important to them.

A Final Word

Co-sponsoring refugees is hugely rewarding and a big responsibility, but **you are never alone**. IRIS is always here to support you, provide advice, answer questions, and – if necessary – assume responsibility for some or all of the resettlement tasks. Many congregations in Connecticut have participated in this wonderful program. If you would like to speak with a group that has had experience resettling refugees, please contact IRIS for names and phone numbers.

