

# A Dutch community's creative collaboration to host Ukrainian refugees

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**A local municipality, a faith-based organisation and a secular grassroots organisation have combined their strengths and capabilities to provide for Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands.**

When the war broke out in Ukraine in February 2022, the Dutch government instructed its 25 regional safety authorities<sup>1</sup> to arrange 50,000 emergency shelter places for Ukrainian refugees. Due to the large influx of refugees that followed, this figure was increased to 75,000 places in March 2022. By July 2023, there were

approximately 95,000<sup>2</sup> Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands. This includes around 77,000 staying in shelters managed by municipalities within each region.

The municipalities faced a huge undertaking. The Netherlands was already experiencing a housing crisis with a shortage of nearly 400,000

homes. As well as providing housing, the municipalities were asked to support refugee integration by providing services including registration, medical care, financial support, job searching, and education. A concerted and coordinated effort involving many stakeholders – government, private business, civil society, charities and grassroots volunteers – was needed to respond effectively to the emergency.

The municipality of Vught, with around 25,000 residents, was initially tasked with housing nearly 100 refugees; this was subsequently increased to 340 refugees by the end of 2023. The quest to find suitable housing led the municipality to reach out to Emmaus, a Catholic retreat centre whose primary mission is to provide hospitality to Christian groups, churches and communities in its 100-year-old buildings. With the support of Welzijn Vught (Well-being Vught), a secular grassroots organisation, a three-way partnership was set up in a matter of days to organise and operate a refugee programme at Emmaus.<sup>3</sup>

To date, more than 130 displaced Ukrainians, mostly women and children, have been housed and cared for at Emmaus. The success of the initiative so far, and the decision to continue hosting refugees for the coming years, has been characterised by ‘five Cs’: collaboration, creativity, care, community and commitment.

### Collaboration

The need for collaboration stemmed from a recognition that the task at hand was too large for any one organisation. The sudden influx of refugees required quick and decisive action with the people and resources available; there was no opportunity for first developing a relationship, nor was there any clarity about possible role sharing or organisational structure. In fact, the first formal meeting involving all three organisations only took place after the first group of 20 refugees arrived at Emmaus.

Developing a common understanding of each other’s organisation and capabilities proved essential for fruitful collaboration. This began with a dialogue concerning mission and purpose. The question “Why am I here?” led to conversations that promoted mutual understanding and trust and also a shared purpose.

Emmaus is inspired by Catholic social teachings which advocate the care and protection of refugees, based on the fundamental belief in the dignity of every human person as a creation of God and in promoting the common good.<sup>4</sup> The municipality of Vught, meanwhile, has not only an obligation but also a genuine desire to arrange high-quality shelter and care for the refugees. Last but not least, the more than 50 volunteers provided by Welzijn Vught are motivated by the desire to give their talents and time to this worthwhile cause.

By recognising the capabilities, strengths and resources available, an appropriate organisational structure was set up. The municipality of Vught would have overall responsibility for the initiative, providing financial, social and security support, and arranging job training, and access to health and education services. Emmaus would provide accommodation, meals and pastoral or spiritual care, and would build a sense of community. Welzijn Vught would engage and coordinate volunteers to provide day-to-day care and support for the refugees, including transport, assistance with registration, and social activities.

### Creativity

‘Out-of-the-box’ thinking is a hallmark of the initiative. Prior to the refugees’ arrival, Emmaus was fully booked by regular groups for most of the year, but with these groups’ support, one of the three wings of the retreat centre was made available for the refugees. This provided fully contained, private accommodation for the refugees while ensuring the privacy of groups staying in the other wings.

Emmaus initially committed to providing emergency shelter for a six-month period, after which the refugees would be moved to longer-term accommodation elsewhere. However, the prolonged war in Ukraine and the difficulty faced by the municipality in finding longer-term accommodation led to two extensions to the refugees’ stay at Emmaus.

Concern for the refugees’ well-being and the need to allow Emmaus to make facilities available for other groups led to an ‘out-of-the-box’ idea to build a separate, semi-permanent facility on-site specifically for the refugees.

This required expedited approval procedures taking three to four months instead of years.

The new facility will consist of four buildings built around a courtyard, providing a sense of both community and privacy. The construction of the new facility was made possible through an investment by Emmaus backed by a rental agreement with the municipality of Vught. The initiative demonstrates that a creative and innovative approach can help overcome the challenges that arise when responding to an emergency situation.

### Care

Providing care for refugees goes beyond simply providing material support in the form of shelter and food. It requires a holistic approach that considers the refugees' physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

Emmaus provides pastoral care and spiritual support, which has been well received by the refugees. The municipality organises access to health-care services and specialised social care where needed. In addition, almost all the adult refugees are employed by local businesses and are supported by job coaches. Meanwhile, the volunteers from Welzijn Vught play a crucial role in providing day-to-day care and support for the refugees, organising activities such as language classes, cooking workshops and excursions to local attractions. These activities not only help refugees to integrate into the local community but also provide a sense of normality and purpose in their daily lives. Volunteers have also provided practical support, such as accompanying refugees to appointments, helping with paperwork, and providing transport.

### Community

Building a sense of community among the refugees and between the refugees and the local community has been an important aspect of the initiative. The refugees come from different parts of Ukraine and from a variety of social backgrounds, which can make it challenging for them to connect with one another and integrate with the local community. Community is central to the identity of Emmaus, and this has given the refugees a sense of belonging, especially those who

have been involved in some of the activities at Emmaus.

Efforts have been made to connect the refugees with the broader local community. Emmaus organised an Open Day in which the refugees were actively involved. This helped break down barriers and build understanding. The initiative has also received support from local businesses and individuals who have donated funds, resources and time.

### Commitment

The success of the initiative has been due to the commitment of all the stakeholders involved. The municipality of Vught, Emmaus and Welzijn Vught have all shown strong commitment, going above and beyond what was required of them. The volunteers have given their time and energy generously, often outside regular working hours; Emmaus has made significant changes to its regular operations to accommodate the refugees; and the municipality of Vught has provided the necessary financial and administrative support.

### Lessons learned

There are a number of lessons – with wider implications – that can be learned from this initiative.

- Faith-based organisations, government and secular grassroots organisations can and should collaborate more to provide care for refugees, using their complementary strengths and capabilities.
- Providing a sense of community and integration is essential for the emotional well-being of refugees. The importance of involving volunteers in building community cannot be overstated.
- Given the shortage of suitable housing, there is a pressing need for structural mechanisms and models to support the construction of semi-permanent facilities for refugees. This could include public-private partnerships to finance construction, the establishment of standardised semi-permanent housing models, and expediting the process for issuing building permits. These initiatives

could be collaboratively implemented by national and local governments, the private sector, and charitable organisations working in the field of refugee assistance.

The success of the refugees-hosting initiative in Vught is due to the recognition of each organisation's strengths and resources, the willingness to be flexible and creative in finding solutions, the holistic approach to caring for refugees, the building of a sense of community, and the strong commitment of all involved. The initiative provides an example of how different organisations can come together to respond to a crisis, and how a community can show compassion and hospitality to those in need.

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1. In the Netherlands, a regional safety authority (*veiligheidsregio*) is a public body responsible for ensuring safety and dealing with crises and disasters in its region. Each safety authority is governed by the mayors of the municipalities in that area, chaired by the mayor of the biggest municipality.
2. Rijksoverheid (2023) *Cijfers opvang vluchtelingen uit Oekraïne in Nederland* [bit.ly/cijfers-opvang-oekraïne-nederland](https://bit.ly/cijfers-opvang-oekraïne-nederland)
3. The 'three-way partnership' involved three types of partners: government (municipality of Vught), faith-based organisation (Emmaus) and civil society/grassroots organisation (Welzijn Vught).
4. Catholic Social Teaching on Refugees & Asylum Seekers [social-spirituality.net/catholic-social-teaching-on-refugees](https://social-spirituality.net/catholic-social-teaching-on-refugees)