

The story of a small Canadian congregation sponsoring a refugee family

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Steps for private refugee sponsorship in Canada are not clearly spelled out for those seeking to be sponsors. While the process is rewarding, it is also challenging and sometimes frustrating.

Canada's Blended Visa Office-Referral (BVOR) programme affords the opportunity for private sponsorship groups to be paired by the Canadian government with refugees seeking resettlement. While the process is well established, each group undergoes its own learning journey. Our experience sponsoring a family illustrates aspects of this journey. The majority of us did not know how to connect directly with a refugee family to sponsor nor did we have direct experience with refugee families or know of any groups who were interested in pursuing this venture.

The members of the team we established to organise the sponsorship had differing motivations for becoming involved. One team member could not "fathom not having a safe place for [her own] children to lay their head at night." Another joined because his grandfather had arrived in Canada as a refugee. At the outset, there were many informal discussions between team members who wanted to "do something" to help refugees but an organised team approach with a designated team leader was required to get the project started. Despite significant misgivings in part due to a fear of being 'in the spotlight' and lack of leadership experience, one person took on the task. A formal information night was scheduled at the South Ridge Fellowship church to outline the BVOR programme, at which about 30 people turned up. Over the next few weeks, a core team of 15 people emerged, and the Fresh Start refugee sponsorship project was established.

Our first major task was to get official approval from the church for our refugee sponsorship in order to work under its auspices. The team was tasked with creating a proposal outlining what the roles of the

members of the group would be and a proposed budget. Once we received official approval from the church, we worked on a settlement plan and fundraising. About six months into the process, the team was matched with a refugee family from Syria who arrived five months later.

Successes and challenges

We are a group of people who previously did not know each other well, forming friendships and bonding with people whom we otherwise might not have got to know, coming together for a common task and working beautifully together to accomplish more than we had ever hoped would be possible.

When looking at the key tasks that a refugee sponsorship group must achieve, we were struck by the diversity of skills and abilities required. We formed subgroups of people to work together, letting them take initiative in areas such as fundraising, renovation of the family's future home and everyday support to work with the family.

We were matched with a family much sooner than we had been led to believe was possible. We had raised only about 25% of our budget at the time and had from a Friday afternoon to a Monday morning to decide whether or not to accept the family. After consideration, the elders of our church told us that if we could raise another \$6,000 that Sunday, we could accept the family, trusting that we would raise the rest in time for the family's arrival. In the event \$32,874 was raised on a single Sunday.

We found an amazing house in our desired area; it was run-down but the landlord was willing to offer it at an extremely favourable rent in exchange for our team undertaking the renovation. Then we

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were able to fully renovate it with donated supplies and volunteer labour. Finally we were able to fully furnish the house with donated goods in beautiful condition.

On the other hand there was major uncertainty in working with our Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH) – the body that has the formal agreement with the federal government and can authorise groups in the community to sponsor refugees under its agreement.¹ Both the government and the SAHs have been overwhelmed by demands for sponsorships. Limited information from the relevant government department has been frustrating; we waited for our family to arrive for three months, and had no information. This led to uncertainty and difficulty planning ahead. In late September 2016 we did get some information about our family including photos of the mother and father.

The lack of communication with the family means that we have only basic information about who they are; we have to make many decisions ‘blind’ and hope they are right for the family. It would have been nice to know ways that they would like us to prepare for them, and we would like to register their children in the local school, but cannot do so because we do not have their birth certificates. We know that we need to help our family in a way that does not create unrealistic expectations

and that fosters eventual independence but do not know exactly how to achieve this.

From our perspective as a small Canadian ‘community of faith’ group, sponsorship of refugees does not come with a clear road map. Although the good faith from our federal government has been there, unfortunately it has not helped clarify the process nor has it made it easy to progress smoothly with our sponsorship project. Lack of information from government agencies or ministries about the family we intend to sponsor, and the distance from and difficulty of timely communication with our SAH, have made our work complicated and challenging.

The inability to connect directly with our family as we planned for their arrival made it difficult for our team to lay down specific and essential groundwork for their resettlement and has required us to exercise considerable patience. We have, however, found tremendous support and overwhelming commitment, both financially and morally, from our congregation, the church leadership, local businesses and determined like-minded individuals.

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1. www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/sponsor/sah-how.asp