

Answering God's Call

In early 2024, we saw many of our migrant brothers and sisters arrive in Chicago and surrounding suburbs. As an Immigrant and Refugee Ministry (IRM), we knew we had to respond. We had already been accompanying refugees over the last 6 years who were assigned to us by Catholic Charities or Heartland Alliance. IRM felt we knew what was involved and agreed to accompany asylum seekers too, including subsidizing their rent for a limited time as well. What we soon struggled with was that although refugees come with documentation already in place, asylum families do *not*, and we had to scramble to help them file for their documentation. Basically, we thought we were going to a baseball game. It ended up being a hockey game! We had to learn it all very fast while amid on-going accompaniment AND a full ministry restructuring. But *Answer God's Call* we did. Our Catholic faith calls us to respond in three ways: Charity, Solidarity (Accompaniment) and Justice.

The following is what we accomplished this past year to answer God's call for **Solidarity** through our Family Liaison Program:

- To date, we have accompanied and subsidized rent for 6 Venezuelan families located in Oak Park, Pilsen, and other areas of Chicago. Total: 12 adults and 11 children.
 - Our liaisons (usually a team of 2-3 IRM members) accompany them, help with registration for school, public libraries, park district programs, English Literacy programs (ELL), resume and job applications, find local food pantries and other social service organizations, and lots more.
 - Of these families, 2 are now independently paying their own rent and utilities, having received work authorization and secure jobs.
 - One more family is a month away from this status. Another family has gone back under the care of Catholic Charities because of extenuating circumstances.
 - Three other families are on their way to achieving independent and self-sustaining status.
- We are in the process of training more ministry members to become liaisons for one more Venezuelan family and one single Venezuelan man.
- Our Family Liaison program also involves collecting household items from OSP donors and organizing them in equal groups per family. Feb of 2024, we collected enough items to fully stock 5 apartments for new families and have enough left over now for two more families. We will have another collection in Feb 2025.
- Along with our household supply collection, once we have an address for a new apartment, IRM partners with Chicago Furniture Bank to purchase and organize delivery of gently used furniture and new beds for the family.
- IRM then coordinates a team of ministry volunteers to unpack the household items, set up the rooms, put bedding on the beds, etc. so the family can have a wonderful welcome when they arrive.
- IRM continues accompaniment for our remaining 4 refugee families such as covering a \$3K dental bill for one of our father, partial rent subsidy when needed, and gifts after completion of high school/GED graduations.

We answered God's call for **Charity** by creating an Immediate Needs and Response Program:

- 100 backpacks were donated to Wright Jr College when it began housing asylum seekers arriving at police stations.
- \$100 Target gift cards were distributed to 56 migrant children attending Von Linn school in Chicago.
- Back-to-school gift cards were presented to each refugee and migrant student in our FLP.
- A shoe drive was organized with FXW school, and the donations were delivered to New Life Church for immigrant family supplies.

- A sign-up link was created to mobilize volunteers to shop for a 2-week supply of food for refugee families arriving via Heartland Alliance. Once signed up, the volunteers were given a shopping list by HA and the date and location of the refugee arrival. Receipts were reimbursed by IRM funds. So far it is estimated that IRM volunteers have provided food for 12 refugee families/individual people.
- A ministry member organized a food drive for the “Loading Dock” where immigrants were arriving in Chicago. This Amazon wish list went out to IRM members, and all food items were delivered to the organizer who distributed them at the Loading Dock, handing surplus supplies to New Life Church already organizing there.

Our final response, answering God’s call for **Justice** has been through Education and Advocacy:

- We assisted and welcomed the Archdiocese Annual Posada for Immigration Reform in December, providing speakers and walkers on the march as well as hospitality - a space for gathering, praying and sharing food after the march - all focused on raising awareness and advocating for immigration reform.
- Our bulletin pages include policy updates, advocacy links and instructions to call for justice for immigrants.
- We bring speakers in to educate the OSP community on relevant issues and ways we all can speak out for justice and act with charity and solidarity.

OSP IRM views every refugee and immigrant as family. When family has needs, we respond with empathy and charity. We also walk a fine line between empowering and enabling. As we have tweaked our program during this past year, we are finding more success in empowering our migrant families to be contributing members of our communities and welcomed members of God’s family.