

Local group preparing to welcome Syrian refugee family to area

By Tabitha Wells

A local organization is sponsoring a Syrian refugee family to come to Canada.

The Headwaters Refugee Sponsorship Committee (HRSC) has been working for several months to bring a family to Canada to begin their new lives.

Originally formed six years ago to assist an Iraqi family who lived in Syria, they were asked to re-form by AURA (Anglican United Refugee Assistance) as the situation has escalated in Syria and more families are applying for refugee status.

"The group finds families who have received refugee status from the UN and put them in contact with groups in Canada," said HRSC member Brian Logel.

He explained that in Canada, there are only four ways to sponsor refugees:

1) By having relatives in a war-torn country or area.

2) By forming groups (church, YMCA, etc.) which are allowed to provide sponsorship.

3) By forming a group of five, meaning five families who get together and guarantee that they will look after the family for a year.

4) Through one of 65 organizations across Canada that are called Sponsorship Agreement Holders (such as AURA).

Although most of the latter organizations are usually associated with churches, that is not a requirement.

"The government allows organizations to help smaller groups, like ours, fill out the refugee application forms to assist a family,"

Logel said. "Once we have demonstrated that we have the power and finances to support a family for one-year, immigration Canada sends the family their visas."

Some of the items that are included in the settlement plan that they must provide include outlining who will consistently help the family get to their ESL classes, citizenship classes, how they will receive housing and ensuring the kids get to school.

HRSC has 65 people who regularly receive their newsletters as part of the group, and 15 who have volunteered to do specific tasks once the family arrives.

AURA had a group selected for the HRSC from the point when they first approached them for help, but the process in getting them here was lengthy. This particular family of four fled Syria four years ago after their village was bombed by government forces.

"The dad was picked up by the (Syrian) government, who were trying to force the men into their army," Logel said. "When he refused, he was beaten. Immediately after that, they grabbed what they could and fled in the middle of the night in a taxi to Jordan."

Since then, they have remained in Jordan as refugees, but the situation there is beginning to deteriorate as well. Prior to the Syrian civil war, the population in Jordan was 7.5 million. It is now estimated that Syrian refugees form one quarter of their current population.

"The Jordanians are beginning to resent the added pressure that the refugees are adding to what was already a poor country," Logel observed. "Jordan has closed the border to Syria, and is no longer allowing refugees. They are no longer allowed to work in Jordan either, so they are limited to living on what they were able to bring with them."

He added that even worse, Jordan is starting to deport Syrian men "about 100 a day so far" and send them back to Syria, even though there is nothing for them there.

"From what I gather, only a small part of Syria is under ISIS's control, and the rebel forces control most of the country," he said.

"Russia is now involved, and is backing the country's dictator. The war is going to last longer. There have been 150,000 new refugees in a short time."

Logel explained that he personally does not believe that this is the fault of the people of Syria, but rather that of an aggressive dictatorship.

"Since the Second World War, the al-Assad family has ruled the country," he said. "The Civil War was started when people were protesting Bashar al-Assad's rule with peaceful demonstrations. President al-Assad sent the army in to open fire on the crowd, leading to the creation of the rebels, leading ISIS and Al Qaeda to take advantage of the situation. There are more than two factions at war, and everything is destroyed. Their economy is gone."

He said that both the rebels and government have continued to bomb parts of Syria, regardless of whether it is known to be a civilian area or not.

"They have been dropping barrel bombs on some civilian areas in order to force the people to support the government," Logel commented. "This is not the people's fault; they didn't do anything to support this. I feel that the whole world should be helping." According to Logel, in the past Canada has taken in large numbers of refugees in short periods of time, and statistics have suggested that it can be good for the country. In 1979, the government brought in 60,000 refugees from Vietnam in just 18 months, and in

1999, they airlifted 5,000 refugees from Kosovo.

“When we're talking about the Syrians, as an overall population, they are well-educated entrepreneurs and professionals,” Logel said. “Before the civil war, they had a growing economy. With the (Canadian) government's promise to bring in so many families, they're professionals, and they're ready to come.”

Part of the delay with many of the refugees has been a lot of red tape, and a slow process in getting approved families their visas. HRSC sent in their final application in August, and the selected family went through their interviews and had their medicals, but are still waiting on visa approval. Although the group knows the details of the family, and has everything arranged, they are not disclosing their names or details because of the situation in Jordan, or the possibility that a Syrian group could find out.

“We have no idea when they are coming,” Logel said. “Immigration Canada said they had received the application, but that's the only official word we've heard. The family informed us through email about the interviews and medicals.”

HRSC still has some needs to meet, both for the family and approval process. In order for the family to be allowed to come to Canada, HRSC needs to guarantee they have \$30,000 raised for the family ? of which, they currently have two thirds.

“Our first need right now is cash donations,” Logel said. “Our group has managed to collect furniture and household items, and we have someone ready to get them an apartment as soon as we receive word they are coming. But right now, getting the funds raised is priority.”

Anyone wishing to provide a donation to the group in order to assist with the family can make a donation in person at Westminster United Church. Cheques are requested to be made to Westminster United Church with Headwaters Refugee Committee in the memo section. Tax receipts are available with the provision of a full address.

For more information or to find out other ways to assist, contact Logel at headwatersrefgroup@gmail.com