



# AN ORIENTATION GUIDE FOR FAITH COMMUNITIES

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# A REFUGEE'S JOURNEY TO AMERICA

The U.S. Refugee Act of 1980 adopted the United Nations definition of a refugee as “a person with a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.” In fiscal year 2014, President Obama set the ceiling for refugees arriving in the US at 70,000.



Flee country of origin to a relatively safe neighboring country or refugee camp

Apply to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for protection; apply for permanent resettlement in a resettlement country where the UNHCR makes sure you qualify as a refugee

Wait for Resettlement Support Center (an agency contracted with the Department of State Bureau of Population and Migration) to prepare a case file

Interview with the Dept. of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to demonstrate you qualify as a refugee

Receive a medical examination, limited ESL instruction, and basic cultural orientation to the U.S.

If you qualify, your application becomes a “CASE” and is assigned to a national agency

Leave country of asylum and arrive at the airport, met by staff from the local Agency and welcomed to your new home



## **What services does Refugee Services of Texas (RST) provide?**

**Core Services:** Refugees coming to the United States through the US Refugee Admissions Program (a function of the US Department of State) are matched with non-profits like RST who provide basic needs assistance including: housing, basic furnishing, utilities, food and clothing. The current federal stipend for newly arrived refugees is intended to cover all initial basic needs upon arrival in the US.

**Case Management:** Case managers assist clients with securing housing, completing Social Security applications, applying for federal assistance programs, enrolling adults in English classes and children in public schools, among other services.

**ESL:** When refugees first arrive to the country they are required to enroll in ESL classes. RST offers a variety of ESL classes to help refugees learn English and prepare for employment.

**Job Development:** Employment specialists assist refugees in completing applications and provide them with information regarding interview skills and American work culture. They also search the area for entry-level jobs and meet with potential employers to discuss available positions.

**Other Services:** A variety of services are offered at different RST offices, including immigration services, extended case management, victims of human trafficking care, and a program for unaccompanied minor children.



In the aftermath of World War II, people around the world joined together to respond to the needs of refugees. The creation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was one result of this collaboration. Over the years, as the idea of resettling displaced peoples became an increasingly important response to the crisis, the US began opening its borders to refugees with the understanding that faith communities would assist in the process of welcoming the stranger.

Refugee Services of Texas (RST) was created in the late seventies by members of faith communities in an effort to coordinate services for refugees in the Dallas area. In 1981, RST became an affiliate of Church World Service, and later, also affiliated with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, and Episcopal Migration Ministries.

The mission of RST is to provide quality services for refugees and other displaced persons, guided by principles of human compassion and dignity. Working in partnership with faith communities, businesses, and volunteers, RST provides clients with resources, referrals, education, and guidance to ensure their successful and self-sufficient lives in Texas.

We offer a face-to-face and cross-cultural ministry opportunity for people of faith to exercise hospitality and welcome to newcomers and help build more welcoming communities. Serving others helps faith communities live out their divine call of service, love and justice.

Put another way, forming relationships with refugees helps people of faith fulfill the one commandment which we all hold dear, no matter our creed or denomination: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*

*RST provides support and services to assist newcomers to our community in building lives in peace and dignity in the United States. We accomplish this through providing initial basic needs support, comprehensive case management, intensive employment preparation and placement services, targeted education and training, and ongoing referrals and encouragement in an effort to assist newcomers in building a meaningful foundation from which to achieve lasting self-sufficiency. Our services are tailored to meet the individual's needs, but the individual him/herself is 100% responsible for how they choose to use this information and support to create a new life in America.*

*Our core values are. . .*

## **EMPOWERMENT**

The goal of the U.S. Refugee Admissions program and each of our staff, clients, and the community members who support them is self-sufficiency. Many refugees arrive having lost confidence in their abilities and feeling scared, lost and alone. In all of our decisions and actions, we work to ensure arriving refugees become self-sufficient and independent as quickly as possible.

## **ACCEPTANCE**

Although it is natural to share what is important to you with others, we firmly request that our partners not engage in proselytism. Many refugees have spent years fleeing persecution because of their faith, and this may be their first chance to live without fear that someone has an agenda to change them in some way. Proselytizing is defined as “inducing someone to convert to one’s own religion.” In all that you do, make sure the refugees understand that your help is not contingent on their participation in your church or religion; we don’t want them to feel they have to become like us in order to receive our assistance.

## **SUSTAINABILITY**

Refugees arrive with so many needs you may think it’s impossible for you to help with all of them. You’re right! It is important in your service to refugees that you always remember you are not ultimately responsible for their well-being. The key to serving in a way that is sustainable is maintaining healthy boundaries, which includes having a clear understanding of your responsibilities, identifying whose responsibility it is to help solve a particular problem, and recognizing your limits.

Walking off a plane into a new land where people speak a foreign language and practice different customs and traditions must be extremely daunting. Faith community partners can play an incredibly important role in helping arrivals adjust to their new environments by forming Welcome Teams. Welcome Teams are comprised of 4-10 members of a faith community who work closely with RST to welcome a newly arrived family. There are three tiers of involvement, with increasing levels of commitment, as outlined below:

- **LEVEL ONE – Pre-Arrival Preparation:** Prepare and gather all household items listed on our *Housing Supply Checklist*. Deliver these items to the refugee(s) apartment and set the apartment up. The household items can be collected through a donation drive at your church or organization. The pre-arrival set-up also includes providing the client(s) with the first week's groceries. The set-up is done before the refugee(s) arrival. **Time Commitment:** Depending on the donation drive, collecting items can take 1 day - 2 weeks and the apartment set-up is done in 1 day.
- **LEVEL TWO – Pre-Arrival & Housing Orientation:** Level One plus receiving the refugee(s) at the airport and transporting them to their new home. This is a great way to welcome them to the United States. Once the client arrives there are a set of core-services that the Welcome Team can assist them with. These services may include providing a warm meal and/or providing an on-site housing orientation upon arrival. **Time commitment:** Donation drive and apartment set-up plus one day.
- **LEVEL THREE – Pre-Arrival, Orientation, & Mentorship:** This level includes both Level One and Two and provides an excellent and gratifying way for your group to support the new family through weekly or bi-weekly mentorship from pre-arrival through their 90th day. **Time commitment:** 3 months

Welcome Teams work collaboratively with RST staff, and receive constant communication and support. RST will provide the appropriate materials to support volunteers such as an RST Housing Supply list and grocery list.

Also, please note that RST practices a declining support model. This means that support tapers gradually throughout the Welcome Team period for an emphasis on early self-sufficiency.

Welcome Team relationships end with a closing ceremony that transitions the relationship to mutual friendship, rather than a continued helping relationship.



Besides the Welcome Team partnership, RST offers a number of various individual volunteer opportunities. Please consult the Volunteer/Housing Coordinator for more information about any of the opportunities listed below, or for additional possibilities:

**Apartment Set-up:** Our refugee clients depend on volunteers to set up their apartments according to basic requirements and standards determined by RST before their arrival to the U.S. Volunteers will be provided a detailed instructions manual and Wal-Mart gift cards for all purchases. An apartment set up is comprised of two parts and volunteers have the option to complete any or all portions.

**Donation Room Organization:** In many cases, our refugee clients arrive to the U.S. with no more than a small suitcase or the clothes on their backs. Our donation room acts as an additional resource to supplement their clothing, childcare items, basic food, and household needs for all ages and genders. Volunteers are needed on a daily basis to provide organizational support and maintenance of the donation room.

**Social Security Assistance:** One of the first core services provided to our refugee clients is the process of obtaining a social security card. This first service is crucial to our clients' ability to apply for other social services such as Medicaid and SNAP benefits. Clients must be picked up from their home, transported to a local Social Security Office, assisted to sign in and fill out appropriate paperwork, and be accompanied through their appointment. After the registration is completed, clients must be taken home by our volunteers. Often, our clients go through the process the day after their arrival to the U.S. and the support and accompaniment of a volunteer provides ease during this intimidating process.

**Bus Orientation:** RST's number one goal is for all incoming refugee clients to achieve early self-sufficiency. The first step towards realizing this goal is the ability to understand and utilize public transportation. With the public bus system, refugee clients are able to transport themselves to our office, grocery stores, doctor appointments and anywhere else they choose. Volunteers are needed to provide bus orientation by riding with refugee clients, pointing out important stops, demonstrating how to board, use the bus pass, where to sit, and how to request a stop.

One of the best ways a faith community can further the work of RST is by making a commitment to support the organization financially. All refugees receive a one-time transitional grant from the federal grant, and have the option to access public benefits for financial support. However, their means are extremely limited, and so are the funds available to RST for providing the core services required for refugees and their families.

The following expenses are ongoing opportunities for financial assistance:

**Rent assistance:** Refugees are responsible for paying rent immediately, and must use funds from the federal grant to do so, until they have secured employment. Any money donated to help pay rent buys a refugee a little more time to find a job, as well as pay for basic goods and services.

**Groceries:** Upon arrival, refugees are able to apply for food stamps, but there is always a lag time between application and receiving the benefit. RST makes sure every new apartment has at least a week's supply of culturally-appropriate groceries.

**Household furnishings:** Every new apartment requires a basic set of furniture and household goods, like beds, linens, towels, tables and chairs. Your financial donation helps offset the costs of these items, which ordinarily would be purchased with money from the refugee's transitional grant.

**Bus passes:** Transportation is a basic obstacle for new refugees. A bus pass helps a refugee get to important appointments, jobs, and grocery stores.

**Emergency fund:** At times, refugees come into the RST office with medical, housing, or other emergencies. RST is unable to give money to clients unless there are donated funds set aside for emergency assistance.

**Office expenses:** Keeping the office stocked with appropriate supplies and resources is an ongoing challenge for non-profit organizations. Your financial gifts can help RST continue to update its technology and décor, as well as encourage its dedicated staff.

**School supplies:** Refugee children must have the age-appropriate items they need to enter American schools. Your gifts ensure that they have the tools they need for success.



Client confidentiality comes down to one basic principle - respect for the dignity of our clients. Refugees flee their home land to find themselves seeking refuge in places that are often unsafe, overcrowded, and unsanitary. Often, they are unable to work to support themselves and their families; they are without privacy or personal space.

We must offer our clients the highest level of respect for their privacy and the right to reveal only the information that they choose to share to whomever they choose to share it. We do this by following basic ground rules to protect confidentiality information about our clients and by empowering them to make decisions on their behalf about who/how/when they share information.

**Volunteers who work with RST agree to:**

1. Respect the privacy of the refugees with whom you are matched. They may not want the stories they share with you to be shared with others. Ask them what you may tell others and what they consider to be private information.
2. Safeguard the confidentiality of refugees by not making their names, stories, and personal circumstances public in any fashion without their consent. This includes the use of photographs and information in news stories for church bulletins, corporate newsletters, and local newspapers, as well as all forms of online and social media, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Vine.
3. Never share medical information with anyone (except the health care provider) without the client's explicit consent. The client is the only one who can make a decision about what information they share about their own health. You may be privy to medical information because someone has confided in you or because you were present at a medical appointment, but that does not mean that the RST staff members or other volunteers on your team have a right to that same information. Keep in mind that information that seems "sensitive" to one person may not be the same for another, so do not assume that because you see it as an innocuous condition, that the person in question may not feel different.

One of the most important contributions you can make to refugee resettlement is **documenting the work that you do by creating an activity note**. Whether you are taking a client to an appointment or simply visiting a family in their apartment, you should be sure to create an activity note to make sure that there is official documentation of the services you have provided. We've found that the best notes are created within 24 hours of providing the service—that way you remember all of the details of the meeting. **After writing your activity note, submit either a paper copy or electronic document to the appropriate case manager at the RST office.**

## **Here are a few examples of Activity Notes:**

*ENGLISH CONVERSATION PRACTICE: Volunteer Sean met Ali at his apartment to practice conversational English. We practiced vocabulary related to interviewing. Ali showed me his recently received electric bill. I pointed out key information but explained I wasn't able to help with paying the bill; encouraged Ali to call case manager if he needed additional assistance.*

*FOOD STAMPS AND MEDICAID: Volunteer Katie took Seung-Yen to the department of Social Services to apply for food stamps and Medicaid. The client received the receipt and Katie drove her home. Katie left receipt with the client and advised her to keep it in a safe place and to give it to her case manager the next time they meet.*

*PHONE CALL CONFIRMING MEDICAL APPOINTMENT: Based on refugee's previous request, volunteer Ben called physician's office to schedule an appointment for Rose on \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_ at \_\_:\_\_. Volunteer then called client to inform her of the appointment date and time and encouraged her to arrive early.*

*TB TESTING: Volunteer Bonnie met the Turabian family at their apartment to follow-up on their TB test appointment. I explained the TB test in detail and reminded the family that they needed to return to the doctor's office to have the test officially read. While I was at the apartment, I also demonstrated proper hand washing and tooth brushing methods.*

- Volunteers will be trained on client confidentiality procedures. Exceptions include sharing confidential information with the staff if a client intends to harm self and/or other, or a child.
- Volunteers will undergo a background check to ensure client safety. These background checks will be submitted to RST before any one-on-one client/volunteer activity takes place.
- Volunteers should not provide money directly to a client. If money is requested, volunteers should discuss the request with the clients' caseworker at RST. Depending on the circumstance, providing money directly to clients can create an imbalance in relationship, damage dignity and pride, lead to manipulation, and/or hinder self-sufficiency.
- Volunteers should not proselytize clients or discuss religion with clients unless the client inquires. Many of RST's clients were persecuted in their home country due to their religion. Even well-meaning activities, such as inviting someone to your church or to attend a religious outing, can lead to unanticipated feeling of pressure or discomfort on the part of the client.
- Volunteers should not provide their cell phone number directly to clients. Though this can be difficult, due to a desire to forge meaningful friendships and to be present in case of emergencies, it can also lead to an infringement on boundaries. For example, clients who have experienced trauma or are experiencing acute stress may call volunteers late into the night or on a repeat basis.
- Volunteers should not engage in romantic relationships with RST clients.
- Volunteers should not take advantage of refugees' vulnerable positions and partake in sexual coercion or manipulation.