COMMUNITIES SUPPORTING CENTRAL AMERICAN FAMILIES SEEKING ASYLUM

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Introduction

Since 2014 the United States has received a wave of Central American families that are escaping the violence that is happening in the northern triangle, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. The predictions for 2016 and 2017 are that even more families will be fleeing and seeking Asylum.

The Good Shepherd United Church of Christ and the Green Valley/Sahuarita Samaritans have had two experiences over the last two years that have given us the opportunity to accompany families and help them acclimate and get settled in the community. What we have learned is that it takes commitment, a broad range of skills, and a compassionate heart that is spread widely throughout the community.

It is clear that this experience can be shared and multiplied beyond the border communities and into the heart of the United States. While faith communities have many of the supports mechanisms and skills sets in their congregations, it is quite possible that other types of compassionate, committed communities are ready to take on the responsibility. Here are some of the things to carefully think through.

The Beginning

If possible it is good to begin the accompanying process with the Asylum family before they present themselves to the Port Authority at the US/Mexico Border. Each case is unique. The first time we were called out of the blue by the Border Patrol and asked if we could sponsor a family from El Salvador. The second time we did a lot of preliminary work with the Kino Border Initiative and had four letters of support for the family: from the local church, the Kino Border Initiative, the Samaritan Humanitarian group and the host family where the family stayed for the first few weeks. We also had a lawyer review the Asylum Application/I-589 that was presented at the border. The family was well prepared when they presented themselves. The minute they were taken into custody, the host family began to call to arrange when they could pick up the Asylum family. This put pressure on the officials and made it clear that there was going to be a strong advocate for the family. We feel this had a very positive effect. The results were that they did not have to post bond, the parent was not shackled or handcuffed while in custody, and the family was released from the detention center after two days.

Support

The Good Shepherd United Church of Christ and the Green Valley/Sahuarita Samaritans have jointly supported and accompanied the Asylum families. It takes a team of supporters because there are lots of areas that need attention, it cannot be done by a single person or even a few. There are many issues that arise and needs that must be taken care of quickly. We have ended up having a cadre of people that have taken on various key roles in particular areas—like medical, legal, education, transportation etc., and then they have enlisted others to help them.
As far as the financial support, we had faith that people would step forward to help the Asylum family. The Church created an Asylum Fund and people have given one time gifts, others have pledged $40 or $50 dollars a month until the family is established. In a short amount of time we had over $6000.00 to support the family. Asylum families are an easy project to contribute to because their stories are so powerful and help us reach for our higher values. The Asylum families are asked to contribute financially as well and they are very industrious.

Language

While it is not essential that everyone on the support team speak Spanish, it is important to involve a few people that have a fluency in Spanish or the language of the Asylum family. Members of the Asylum family will have various levels of fluency in English and that should be encouraged, nonetheless it is critical that they have people that they can communicate with that understand their home culture and language.

Housing

Ultimately the family needs a safe place that they can call their home. With both families we have worked with we have had them stay for a short period of time with a host family. This gave them constant attention and support as they were getting settled into a new and strange culture. With our first Asylum family we assessed that a more structured community was needed and we were able to locate them in another state with a group of nuns. With our second Asylum family we looked into finding a house or an apartment to rent. We decided on an apartment, but there were a number of road blocks. Since the asylum parent cannot work, and they have no history of employment or pay stubs the church needed to step forward and sign the lease for six months which also eliminated a Security Deposit and a 1st/last month rent. The church also stepped forward to get the electricity turned on which saved a $250 security deposit.

Furnishings

We were able to furnish the whole apartment for free with assistance from the Salvation Army and White Elephant (Local Community run Thrift Shop). Individuals helped with sheets, towels, kitchen supplies, and other items. We held a “Pound Party”(Everyone brought a pound of sugar, flour, toilet paper to and open house) to welcome the family and filled their shelves with the basic necessities.

Medical Care

With both Asylum families there were significant medical and health issues that need to be addressed early in their arrival. It appears that there were medical issues that had not been addressed for quite some time and in both cases the children had not received all of their immunizations. We have used our connections at a community clinic as well as a clinic in Tucson that is specifically for refugees and immigrants. Through these contacts the families have been able to sign up for a discount plan where visits and medications are discounted or
given for free. It is important to have at least one person that can over see their medical needs and be a strong medical advocate for them.

**Legal Care**

We were advised to find a good competent immigration attorney, if possible pro-bono or near-bono. We had a couple option, a professor of immigration law at the University of Arizona decided to take the case and is providing the legal advice along with a law student. It is important to move quickly on the legal work because it is very tedious and an initial court hearing is set soon after their arrival and the asylum seeker must appear. It is surprising how many asylum seekers do not have a lawyer and appear by themselves. We believe it is a strong message to the judge and the court when the asylum seeker appears in court with multiple community advocates and a strong lawyer.

**Psychological Care**

It is important to understand that Asylum Families are fleeing terror, abuse, violence, torture, and repression. They have witnessed atrocities that are sometimes layered upon layers, they have survived and escaped but still carry memories and wounds that are festering. It is critical to have a skilled mental health counselor that is part of the team that has experience in trauma and understands the journey of refugees and migrants. If at all possible the counselor should be fluent in the language and the culture because the issues they will deal with are buried deep below the surface. It is also essential that they have skill in working with children, because the children will need the care as much as the adults. This work must be done by a professional in a professional setting with regular appointments until some stability is achieved. The people that accompany the Asylum family need to be aware that the trauma will come out in many different ways and they need to be supportive and caring and try not to take some of the behavior personally.

**Education**

Our current asylum family has four children ages, 15, 12, 9 and 4. Since they arrived in the summer our education specialist was able to take the three older children to their respective schools and introduce the family to the principal and staff. They are now enrolled in public schools in the community and are receiving English Language Development (ELD) classes to help get them up to speed. Two of the children are preliterate, even in their native language, so their needs are greater for learning educational foundations. The schools have been incredible as they have made special accommodations and have even set up special one on one teaching in a small classroom setting as well as after school tutoring. For the 4 year old a visit to a church run preschool in the community was made and they offered to have the child attend two days a week and waived the costs. The mother has enrolled in ESL classes.

**Transportation**

There are multiple transportation needs that begin to arise. We have created a transportation team of folks that can be called to help transport the family to appointments and other
commitments. This sometimes requires two vehicles because of the size of the family. It is critical that the transportation team require that everyone use seatbelts and appropriate car seats.

**Church and Religious Life**

Each migrant family will have different religious needs. It is important to be respectful of their traditional religious practices and give them options and help them find the right place that will work for them. Our current Asylum family has visited other churches but has found the Good Shepherd to be a warm and inviting place for them to worship and be supported in their faith. We have been able to hire an interpreter that has helped them feel more a part of the worship experience.

**Food Bank or other Volunteer Opportunities**

We were able to connect the Asylum Family with our local food bank. This was a really good connection because it gave them the opportunity to get food for free, but it also gave the parent and her older son the opportunity to give back to the community. They both started to volunteer the first week and have felt very connected and supported by the other volunteers. The point is that Asylum families want to give back and not just be on the receiving end of good deeds, so it is important to find ways that the can do that. For this Asylum family, the week isn’t complete without spending time serving at the food bank.

**Recruiting Churches and Communities to Adopt Asylum Families**

With so many Central American Families arriving at the US/Mexico Border it is critical that Churches and communities of conscience step up and find ways to support and accompany Asylum families. The hope is that groups can begin to explore the possibilities and use this guide to help them think through the responsibilities and how they might move forward. The Kino Border Initiative located in Nogales, Arizona and Sonora, Mexico is a key partner in locating and placing potential Asylum Families. The Good Shepherd United Church of Christ has a strong relationship with Kino Border Initiative and can help make the right connections and answer questions throughout the process. If interested please contact: Rev. Randy J. Mayer, biensphrd@aol.com or 520-625-1375.