

Fairlawn Avenue United Church's Refugee Ministry

May 2019

Over the 40 years since the Canadian government opened a path for private refugee sponsorship, Fairlawn Avenue United Church has supported the application of 12 families for refuge in Canada. Nine of these applications have turned into active projects helping a total of 39 persons start new lives in Canada. Two applications were denied by Canada, and one is still pending.

These cases came in family sizes ranging from one to 12. Twelve recent refugees fled the war in Syria. As we raised concern for the safety of the first Syrian family facing deportation from Lebanon back to Syria, Fairlawn's advocacy was in the public media, and brought us support from beyond the congregation.

Through the recent Syrian refugee period the congregation has experienced memorable events and a full spectrum of emotions. Fairlawn members have been active in the community helping our newcomers: find accommodation, apply for proper documentation, apply for and/or find jobs, consider school or recreation options, navigate the TTC, get connected with the health and dental care systems, learn English or catch up to the school curriculum. The congregation has collectively invested thousands of hours directly with the families (in addition to committee meetings). Many Fairlawn members have gained first-hand experience with the challenges posed by Canadian society for those at the low end of the income scale and with language or cultural barriers.

In addition to the Syrian cases, over the past four years Fairlawn members have been involved in other aspects of refugee sponsorship. We have:

- spoken and met with other sponsor groups;
- held two evenings for sponsors to connect;
- participated in an umbrella group for sponsors called Canada4Refugees;
- participated in several research studies and surveys; and
- supported 'our' newcomers in programs they have developed to:
 - improve other newcomers' English skills and prepare for the Canadian citizenship test;
 - enable newcomers to express themselves through art.

We've held fundraising and social events at the church including: two fundraising teas, the 'Al Sadaka' dinner, a potluck supper, and a Dickens reading. We have featured refugee stories during worship services, at the 'Bethlehem markets,' and in our Fairlawn Connection magazine. We have shared stories in person with two or three other churches.

From April 2015 to April 30, 2019 the refugee fund has received \$165,000 and spent \$142,000. The current balance of \$23,000 may be sufficient to sponsor the single-person outstanding refugee application we have supported. However, we may also need to financially support contingencies arising for our existing families. Unplanned expenses do come up after the 12 month sponsorship period, and we respond on a case-by-case basis.

A Refugee Advisory Group was formed two years ago to address these contingent situations and to provide general oversight to the various committees. The Advisory Group is comprised of John Cowan, Lori Hale, Kathy Magladry and Jane Rounthwaite. It is reviewing all inputs from the congregation and will make a decision about Fairlawn's future refugee work. This may require putting proposals or recommendations forward to our Governing Council.

Challenges

No one will deny there have been challenges along the way:

- Finding suitable housing has become increasingly difficult in this city, from the perspective of availability, affordability and cleanliness/absence of vermin.
- We have faced insect infestations which involved many hours of extra work as well as expense.
- Becoming fluent in English has been a challenge for our newcomers, even ones who arrived with some English. This language difficulty contributes to the even more major difficulty of finding employment. We note that all of the Syrian newcomers who have found jobs were hired because of their first language skills (Arabic or Kurdish) and are not working in purely English environments.
- In terms of health care, we have found that all cases required expensive dental work. The budget could not predict these costs and we had to find dentists who were willing to do some pro bono work or work for reduced rates. Affordable dental care is an ongoing issue for our newcomers, as it is for all low income persons.
- All of the newcomers have struggled to some degree with mental health issues. Not only are they trying to adapt to a new language and culture, but they also have come through trauma and left behind or lost family members and friends. Their experiences can be overwhelming and we cannot expect newcomers to be happily settled and well-adjusted after only 12 months.

In terms of challenges for Fairlawn volunteers, we are happy to report that the relationships with our newcomers have been mostly very positive. Challenges arise, however, when:

- Our agenda is not in alignment with the newcomer's agenda. We may advise something that the newcomer does not act upon, even though we may think it is in their best interests. Sometimes it has been hard for us to determine the best advice, since we don't necessarily understand the full impact of the trauma they have been through, and we don't necessarily understand the challenges of living on a low income in a foreign land.
- Newcomer financial needs extend beyond 12 months and costs arise that the newcomers are unable to pay. (For example, expensive medication or dental bills, education/training or other large expense items). Our willingness to consider extra needs is driven by the nature of the need and the plan presented for co-investment by the family. In one case the family turned to Ontario Works for support after our 12 month period of financial sponsorship.

All of these challenges are universal to the sponsorship experience. We have spoken with many sponsor groups and newcomers who have faced similar challenges.

Successes

There has been a high level of volunteer participation and satisfaction from the congregation:

- Fairlawners can be very proud of what we have accomplished by recently offering a chance at a new life to 12 people so far.
- Members of the 3 refugee committees say they have received as much or more than they have given. The committee members recently met to reflect on their experiences. In response to the question “what impact did this work have on you” the positives far outweighed any negatives. They said things like: “The experience was at times challenging and time-consuming but it made me feel more connected to Fairlawn; the experience was community building; I have more understanding of another culture/religion; it was delightful, stimulating, felt good to be part of something important and big; it reinforced my beliefs in the goodness of people; it was a spiritual experience where we walked the talk of loving our neighbour; at times a difficult, but powerful learning experience; transformative; provided me with a sense of purpose.”
- In addition to the committees, many members of Fairlawn have been touched and inspired by our newcomers, and have volunteered to help in specific ways (moving, tutoring, and helping with job searches, to name a few) or have been generous donors to the Refugee Fund.

For the newcomers, they have been given a chance to start a new life away from war and destruction. Their successes have been many and include landing a job and making new friends.

Our first sponsored Syrian family has now applied for Canadian citizenship: a huge success for a family that never held citizenship anywhere before!