What can I do to serve refugees?

Step 1: Increase your awareness

Step 2: Learn locally
Step 3: Pray for your inspiration
Step 4: Begin by beginning

“Each one of us can increase our awareness of the world events that drive these families from their homes. We must take a stand against intolerance and advocate respect and understanding across cultures and traditions.” – Elder Patrick Kearon, Refuge from the Storm

If you only remember this:

- This step is important because everyone can do it—old and young, far and near—and then “take a stand against intolerance and advocate respect.” Greater knowledge will always help us serve more wisely.
- All refugees are immigrants, but not all immigrants are refugees.
- 1 out of every 100 of Heavenly Father’s children on the earth today have been forcibly displaced from their homes and cannot return because of an ongoing fear of violence. It is anticipated this number will rise drastically through the foreseeable future.
- To enter the United States as a refugee, security screening, medical checks, and many other standards are not only more stringent, but completely separate from the rest of the U.S.’s immigration laws and procedures. It is harder to come as a refugee than in any other way.

In this handout:

A. Worldwide Perspective
B. Refugee Camps
C. U.S. Refugee Resettlement: The Big Picture
D. Finding a New Home in the U.S.

A. Worldwide Perspective

There are at least 65.3 million forcibly displaced persons in our world today. About 51% of these are children. UNHCR Global Trends 2015

A refugee is someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country,” according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
The UNHCR uses this definition to determine refugee status. This is important to know because (1) refugee status is NOT automatically given to anyone who claims it, (2) individuals must legally prove their identity AND where they have come from to be named a refugee, (3) this process often takes years to complete, and (4) the U.S. has required this UNHCR status as an added level of security refugees resettling in our country since 1980. Using the most recent available data (new data will be available June 2017), here are the facts from 2015:

- Of 65.3 million individuals forcibly displaced from their homes,
- 21.3 million were officially classified by the UNHCR as refugees,
- 134,000 individuals were qualified by the UNHCR for third-country resettlement,
- 66,500 of these individuals were resettled to the United States.*

For a personal description of the United States vetting process that has been in place for years, see this article written by a former immigration officer for the Department of Homeland Security: https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/02/01/refugees-are-already-vigorously-vetted-i-know-because-i-vetted-them/?utm_term=.6b2feb88f651.

*A refugee begins the rigorous U.S. security screening process only after the UNHCR qualifies them for resettlement. The U.S. screening process usually takes a minimum of 18-24 months. My friend from Somalia lived in a refugee camp in Kenya for 10 years before being officially designated a “refugee”; waited another 8 years to qualify for third-country resettlement; then another 7 years to complete the U.S. security screening process. These lengths of time are not unusual.

B. Refugee Camps

Refugee camps are meant to offer temporary relief until political and/or humanitarian stability can be regained. The UNHCR is responsible for these camps and provides food, drinking water, tents, and medical care, and works toward other solutions for refugees.

The UNHCR’s ultimate aim is to find a “durable solution” to the plight of refugees. Because refugee camps are not suitable as permanent habitations—for so many reasons—the UNHCR works toward one of three types of durable solutions, in this order: 1) voluntary repatriation back to country of origin, 2) local integration to the host country and, only for the most vulnerable refugees, 3) resettlement to a third country.

“The legacy of the world’s conflicts can be seen in the scores of camps for refugees around the world. ... Contrary to popular belief, many of these settlements are far from temporary, and most of the largest ones are in Africa and South Asia. ... The massive Dadaab complex in Kenya (which includes the Hagadera, Dagaahaley, and Ifo camps) has existed for years, even decades.* ... Many refugee settlements are located on arid or marginal lands. With scarce local resources from which to draw, most residents of these facilities depend on external aid for survival.”
http://storymaps.esri.com/stories/2013/refugee-camps/

*My friend arrived in Dadaab at 1 year old and left when she was 26 years old. Dadaab was built in 1991 to “temporarily” accommodate 90,000 individuals. In 2011, it had a population of 500,000.

C. U.S. Refugee Resettlement: The Big Picture

The story of America accepting refugees might aptly begin in 1620 with the Mayflower. However, in 1948 was the first federal legislation to smooth and regulate the arrival of refugees from post-World War II Europe. The next major legislation was the Refugee Act of 1980. This landmark law is notable for changing the need for refugees to find personal sponsors,* the effective way it combines the strengths of both government and private—usually religious—agencies, and its quickness to upgrade security requirements as the world has changed. In a testament to its efficacy, this law has remained in force through 37 years of congresses and presidents while giving new hope to over 3 million of the world’s most persecuted and vulnerable people.

For many years, the United States has accepted the majority of refugees approved by the UNHCR for resettlement. (It is important to remember, however, that the UNHCR qualifies considerably less than 1% of refugees for resettlement annually.) In 2015, the United States welcomed 66,500 refugees out of the 107,100 resettled to third countries. The rest were accepted by 25 other nations. UNHCR Global Trends 2015

Important Note on Security: Before 2001, the number of refugees brought to the United States hovered around 100,000 per year. In FY2002 (in response to 9/11), this annual number dropped to around 20,000 while security safeguards were restructured and significantly stiffened. (This was part of a general security overhaul; none of the 9/11 conspirators were refugees.) The number of refugee admissions—along with the difficulty of security hurdles—has steadily risen since then. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/about/history

Frankly, the idea that the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program needs more extreme vetting is met with sincere surprise and bewilderment by people familiar with the process. In what is considered an extremely diplomatic response, on March 2, 2017, the UNHCR released the following statement: “In light of today’s Executive Order regarding U.S. refugee resettlement, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, underscores that refugees are ordinary people forced to flee war, violence and persecution in their home countries and who remain in urgent need of life-saving assistance and protection.

Commenting on the Executive Order the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said: ‘The imperative remains to provide protection for people fleeing deadly violence, and we are concerned that this decision, though temporary, may compound the anguish for those it affects,’ adding that ‘UNHCR has long been a partner for the United States in finding solutions to refugee problems, and we look forward to continuing this partnership.’
UNHCR reiterates its readiness to engage constructively with the U.S. Administration to ensure all refugee programs meet the highest standards for safety and security.

Americans have long played a crucial role in promoting global stability while simultaneously exemplifying the highest humanitarian ideals, from support for refugee emergencies overseas, to welcoming some of the most vulnerable refugee families in the United States to rebuild their lives in safety, freedom and dignity. This is the gold standard in refugee protection and a powerful model for all countries. At a time of record-high levels of forced human displacement, this kind of humane leadership is needed more than ever.” [http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/press/2017/3/58bdd37e4/unhcr-underscores-humanitarian-imperative-refugees-new-rules-announced.html](http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/press/2017/3/58bdd37e4/unhcr-underscores-humanitarian-imperative-refugees-new-rules-announced.html)

*For example, since 1980, this means refugees no longer stay in the homes of private citizens when they arrive; federal money provides housing for the first few months.

D. Finding a New Home in the U.S.

“The Department of State works with nine domestic resettlement agencies that have proven knowledge and resources to resettle refugees. Every week, representatives of each of these nine agencies meet to review the biographic information and other case records sent by the overseas Resettlement Support Centers (RSC) to determine where a refugee will be resettled in the United States. During this meeting, the resettlement agencies match the particular needs of each incoming refugee with the specific resources available in a local community.* If a refugee has relatives in the United States, he or she is likely to be resettled near or with them. Otherwise, the resettlement agency that agrees to sponsor the case decides on the best match between a community’s resources and the refugee’s needs...The cost of refugee transportation is provided as a loan, which refugees are required to begin repaying after they are established in the United States.” [http://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/receptionplacement/index.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/receptionplacement/index.htm)

To find out which resettlement agency works closest to you, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services) has a handy map... [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/state-programs-annual-overview](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/state-programs-annual-overview). If you click on a state on the map, it will give you the name, location, and contact information for all refugee resettlement agencies in that state.

* For example, only two domestic resettlement agencies operate in Utah: International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Catholic Community Services (CCS). They are given about 2 weeks’ notice when new refugees will be arriving. CCS in Utah is further designated as a location that provides the additional services needed for refugees who are single mothers, unaccompanied minors, and victims of torture and human trafficking.