



## Widening the Circle



### **A Resource Guide for Hosting Asylum Seekers in Chicagoland**

By: The Sanctuary Working Group

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#### **Introduction:**

##### **Our Mission Statement:**

***The Sanctuary Working Group, a solidarity organization, supports and accompanies vulnerable migrants in their journey towards sustainable independence.***

[The Sanctuary Working Group \(SWG\)](#) is a cooperative, grassroots network of over 40 different organizations and faith communities, primarily from across the Chicago area, uniquely positioned to respond to the current arriving migrants. The SWG provides friendship/accompaniment, as well as urgent financial assistance, housing, and case management support to newly arrived asylum seekers from across the globe.

Since March 2020, the Sanctuary Working Group, a program of Wellington United Church of Christ (WUCC), has offered support and accompaniment to over 300 asylum seekers - as individuals and family units - primarily from Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

#### **Context:**

An asylum seeker is first and foremost a human being with a name, a face, and a story. [Asylum seekers risk everything to flee violence and persecution in their home countries](#) in the hopes of finding safety and welcome in the United States. Many cross treacherous oceans on crowded boats, while others take dangerous journeys by foot across numerous borders to get here.

[The process of seeking asylum is a long and complicated one.](#) Once someone reaches the US port of entry, they go through a “credible fear” interview in which an immigration official judges whether an individual is eligible for asylum. If found eligible, the individual



must then appear in immigration court at a later date (often many months later) for a decision to be made on their asylum status.

In the meantime, asylum seekers are given limited assistance or direction on where and how to meet basic needs of food, housing, and healthcare. They often wait for over a year to receive a work permit to support themselves, and may struggle to find and afford reliable immigration attorneys to assist with their legal case. Language and cultural barriers can further complicate the ability to navigate life in a new community. Amidst these struggles, asylum seekers demonstrate tremendous resilience, and are deserving of the same opportunities, peace and happiness we all seek.

[While some cities and nonprofits work tirelessly to assist asylum seekers](#), they generally have limited time and resources to provide all necessary support. Innovative and impactful partnerships with diverse faith communities – churches, temples, and mosques – have been proven to make a life changing, even life-saving difference for our newest neighbors in need.

In the first year of arriving, few needs are more crucial than housing. It is extremely difficult to address complicated legal, financial, and health related issues without a safe and reliable place to call home for a while. Many Sanctuary Working Group members have stepped up to meet this urgent need for individuals and families in remarkably creative and impactful ways throughout the Chicagoland area. The need is great however, as more and more asylum seekers arrive at our city's doorstep.

This resource guide is a helpful introduction to passionate faith communities, organizations, and community members interested in providing temporary housing (3 months to over one year) to our asylum-seeking neighbors. Providing a safe and welcoming place for asylum seekers to call home for a while is a beautiful way to put our faith and belief in humanity into action – to love our neighbors as ourselves. It is also a powerful expression of solidarity amidst a complicated, and often unjust immigration system.

## **An Ideal Safe and Welcoming Host Space:**

First and foremost, a faith community/organization/community member will need to determine if they have an appropriate space for an asylum seeking individual or family to live and sleep in. This could include housing someone in a home that a faith community/organization owns (ex: parsonage), transforming an open space within the faith community/organization into a temporary home (ex: classroom), or opening up at



space within a community member's own home (ex: bedroom/office). Whichever way, the space should ideally be:

- Welcoming and Accessible (ex: members/employees are all kind and respectful of guests, living space is available at all times, reliable transportation and laundry nearby)
- Safe and Private (ex: separate from the daily work of the faith community/organization/community member, has locked entrance and exits, curtains on the windows, no concerns of being alone with unknown individuals)
- Well Furnished and Equipped (ex: room with bed, table and chairs, dresser, mini-fridge, and access to private shower and shared kitchen)

\*Hosts and guests are encouraged to work together respectfully to establish private, as well as shared common spaces. If your space does not currently include access to a private room and shower, as well as a shared kitchen, it is important to consider if they could be built. If not, it is worth exploring other creative ways to meet these needs.

## **Process for Hosting an Individual or Family:**

Numerous members of the Sanctuary Working Group work in partnership with nonprofit agencies that are tasked with providing intensive casework to asylum seekers in the Chicagoland region, including: [Refugee One](#), [World Relief](#), [United African Organization](#), [Children's Legal Center](#), [Scalabrini Center](#), [Bethany House of Hospitality](#), [Viatorian House of Hospitality](#), [IL Community for Displaced Immigrants \(ICDI\)](#), [The Faith Community Initiative](#), and the [Heartland Alliance/Kovler Center](#). When staff from these agencies become aware of an asylum seeking individual or family in urgent need of housing, they contact the SWG. Leadership within the SWG then contacts faith communities, organizations, and community members with available and appropriate space that have expressed interest in providing temporary housing.

An introductory meeting is facilitated by SWG between the asylum-seeking individuals, key members of the host group, and the sponsoring nonprofit organizations tasked with casework. The meeting will seek to establish relationships and trust amongst partners, as well as to clarify roles and expectations throughout the housing arrangement.

In the event a good match is made, the host faith community/organization/community members should ideally create a welcoming committee that prepares for a new guest, and ensures their well-being throughout the stay. It is recommended that the committee appoints one particular trusted point person who the guest(s) can consistently turn to as questions and needs arise, and who can act as a reliable connector between the guest



and the aforementioned partners. Having one primary contact helps create stability and avoid potential confusion.

## **Roles and Responsibilities:**

Many questions may initially arise about how different needs will be met, and who will be responsible for meeting each need. It is very important to note that asylum seekers have tremendous knowledge and resilience, and hope to be self-sufficient as soon as possible. Listening first to what they may or may not need assistance with is key to building understanding and trust. This being said, arriving to a new country with limited resources often requires learning a new system, and a certain amount of initial help with housing, finances, healthcare, legal, and language assistance.

It is important to note that the host group's primary role will be to provide safe and welcoming housing, to be an accompanying friend, not to be a caseworker. On the other hand, there may be occasions when you are needed to help with an issue that falls outside of the role of a caseworker. As different needs arise, the roles and responsibilities of each partner include:

**Sponsoring Nonprofit Agency** - The previously named sponsoring agencies will provide a reliable caseworker throughout your guest's stay. Caseworkers ensure asylum seekers are able to access any government related benefits they may be eligible for, including: Medicaid or County Care, SNAP and WIC if appropriate, and public education. These agencies may also provide additional English as a Second Language classes, wellness groups, legal assistance, summer camps for kids, and more. Caseworkers can always be consulted during regular weekday hours as any unmet, urgent needs arise.

**Host Faith Community/Organization/Community Member (aka "host group")** – As previously noted, the host group's primary role is to provide safe, welcoming, and reliable temporary housing, ideally with a shower and a kitchen. Given that many asylum seekers are initially unable to work until a work permit is granted (which can take up to one year or longer), some groups also provide monthly financial assistance to help with food, transport, and other basic needs. In the event public transportation is not available, help with transport to appointments, grocery store, etc...may be needed. Access to a phone and computer is also an important necessity for guests in order to respond to their legal case, keep in touch with family and friends, and search for work and other opportunities. Host groups may also offer connections to local community



groups and events, though there should be no expectation for participation placed on the guests.

**Sanctuary Working Group** – In addition to facilitating the match between an individual/family in need of housing and a host group, the SWG can provide invaluable knowledge and assistance to new host groups. The SWG is comprised of numerous members who have experience hosting asylum seekers, and can share additional resources and best practices as needed. In fact, members of the host's welcoming committee will be invited to weekly SWG meetings to learn from and share with the coalition. The SWG can also provide monthly financial assistance to guests if the host group is unable, and can help fill in the gaps of any other needed items! Particular point people within SWG will also be available during day and evening hours in the event any urgent/emergency issues arise.

### **Additional FAQ's:**

*Is there any kind of signed agreement about rules and expectations host groups utilize?*

While not required, a brief, but clear signed agreement can be a tremendous help to establishing expectations and trust. Agreements may help address: length of stay, a cleaning schedule, special medical arrangements, evening hours, handling emergencies, and much more. There are templates other hosts have used that can be easily adapted.

*Is it legal to provide free housing, is the housing provider legally liable for the outcome of an asylum seeker's legal case in any way?*

Asylum seekers who are awaiting a decision on their asylum case are in the country legally. Providing free temporary housing to an individual or family is a legal and loving act of hospitality. A host group is in no way liable for the outcome of an asylum seeker's case decision. Some groups may choose to include a clause in the signed agreement stating no liability for any legal or financial matter.

*How long is a typical length of stay? What if a group can't host for as long as an individual/family may need?*

A typical length of stay is at least 3 months, while some hosts have provided housing to asylum seekers for over one year. It is important to remember that work authorization can take a year, so it may take a while for asylum seekers to become financially self-sufficient. If a host group is only able to host for a limited amount of time, the SWG will help establish new transitional housing when the time comes.

*Does a host faith community/organization/community member need to speak the same language as the individuals and families we host?*



While it would be ideal for the point person within the host group to be bilingual in the language of the guests, it is not required. Some asylum seekers may arrive with some working knowledge of English, and many will attend ESL classes. In the meantime, host groups often use google translate, and phone-based interpretation services as needed.

*If we aren't ready to host, what are other ways we can help?*

Even if a group is unable to provide temporary housing at this time, there are many additional ways to support asylum seekers in Chicagoland. This includes: providing logistical and financial support to asylum seekers being hosted by other groups, sponsoring and accompanying asylum seekers throughout their journey, and joining the advocacy work of the SWG/CRLN to ensure the inherent dignity and rights of asylum seekers are protected. Emergency/short-term housing is also occasionally needed for asylum seekers, and is a helpful introduction to providing more temporary housing into the future.

## **Resources:**

Regardless of how you are able to help at this time, please know you have the full support and appreciation of the [Sanctuary Working Group](#). We encourage you to reach out with any questions, as well as for connections to SWG members who have extensive experience housing asylum seekers. For questions and contacts, please email SWG Meeting Coordinator, Chris Inserra at [cminserra@sbcglobal.net](mailto:cminserra@sbcglobal.net).

For more on best practices for housing and supporting asylum seekers, we recommend:

[Sanctuary. Not Deportation Toolkit for Supporting Asylum Seekers](#)

[House Your Neighbor Toolkit – Neighbors United](#)

[Congregational Accompaniment Project for Asylum Seekers - Universalist Unitarian Service Committee](#)

[Neighbor to Neighbors Supporting Asylum Seekers Toolkit and Webinar - Episcopal Migration Ministries](#)

[The Workshop – Immigration Resources from World Relief](#)

