

6 Ways to Help Refugees in Your Community

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Describing the refugee crisis as dire is an understatement. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are 59.5 million people who are forcibly displaced worldwide. They are fleeing from grim circumstances ranging from civil war to religious persecution and often arrive at their destination with only a fraction of their family still intact. Getting involved can be daunting, but the need for assistance is greater than ever.

Molly Brown, a creative arts consultant, has been volunteering at some of the almost 20 refugee centers around the city of Berlin since last September. “In the beginning, especially, it felt like a state of heightened urgency. Thousands of people were pouring into Berlin after surviving perilous journeys and traumas along the way,” Molly says. “Volunteering can be a challenging experience because one can feel one has no real impact, so, over time, volunteer interest can wane. No matter, I see this as a moral concept. You don’t have to devote your life to it, but if everyone did just a little bit, it would help a lot.”

We often hear stories of people going abroad to alleviate some of these needs, but the reality is that so much can be accomplished within our own neighborhoods.

Here are just a few of the ways that you can begin helping refugees in your community.

1. Donate

It seems obvious, but seriously, every dollar helps. Making a financial donation to an accredited organization, such as the UNHCR, Red Cross Europe or Save the Children, can help provide emergency health services and improve the living conditions of refugees around the world. Some organizations even allow you to direct your gift to an office in your area. Another option is to start a fundraising campaign. Run a marathon or give up your birthday presents and encourage your friends and family to donate instead. You can do this through an organization or on your own with a fundraising site like GoFundMe. If you’d rather donate something more tangible, reach out to your local resettlement center and see what essential items they are missing. “Consider carefully what you are donating to the centers,” says Molly. “There have been so many inappropriate and even hilarious things donated, like skiing or bike racing gear, and very out-of-date styles. What they want, for instance, are prayer rugs, rubber slippers for showers or running shoes. When the seasons change, they are look-

ing for suitable clothing, like shorts, t-shirts and sandals when the weather warms.”

2. Seek service opportunities

Help refugees integrate into a new culture by utilizing your own skills. Tutor someone learning your language, coach a sports team, offer free haircuts or anything else you feel qualified to do.

Molly added that this especially applies if you share a common language with the refugees in your community. “There’s always a problem getting foreign language volunteers. If there are any speakers of Arabic, Farsi, any of the Afghan languages, etc., they can provide immeasurable support in so many ways, even if they just contribute an hour a week.” For more general opportunities, it’s as simple as a Google search of “volunteer to help refugees in [your city or country].” Try to be flexible - that way you can go wherever assistance is most needed.

“I am currently doing a lot of laundry in a former exhibit hall, serving 600 members, mostly families,” Molly says. “They have only three little washers and dryers so, for example, when you go in on a Monday, you’ll have dozens and dozens of loads waiting. We put them on half-hour cycles and run them through for hours and hours and you’ve barely made a dent.”

3. Hold awareness and fundraising events

World Refugee Day is coming up on June 20 and is the perfect motivation to plan something. Ask local schools to incorporate issues surrounding refugees into their lesson plans. Screen a topical film. Invite a speaker to come to your place of worship or community center. Be sure to contact relevant organizations in your area and see if they have any materials like banners, t-shirts or posters to help advertise your event.

4. Frequent refugee-owned businesses

Actively search for businesses in your community that are owned by or hire refugees and show your support. Also look out for businesses that partner with resettlement centers. There are many businesses, particularly retailers, which sell items created by refugees with the proceeds going directly back to those families. “The current project is finding donated, fully-functioning sewing machines, notions and fabric to initiate a sewing program at the center where the women could not only be paid by the piece for repairs and alterations to donated clothing, but where they could also create and sell their own handmade pieces through participating local shops,” Molly says.

5. Host asylum seekers in your home

If you have a spare room, consider welcoming someone into your home. Resources like the Refugees Welcome initiative match those with a space available to refugees in need. Refugees Welcome has chapters working in 20 countries and can even help you find a way to finance your rent in exchange for your generosity.

6. Get active online

Social networking sites continue to be an important resource. Educate others and post using relevant hashtags. For instance, the International Organization for Migration started the campaign #MigrantsContribute to change the conversation about migration in today’s society by telling individual stories.

A number of online petitions have been launched as well, including the IRC’s #RefugeesWelcome, which encourages supporters in the U.S. to ask their government officials to offer a safe haven and new start to refugees fleeing war and persecution. Find one that speaks to you, sign it and promote it.

7. Finally, don’t overdo it

When volunteering in any capacity, having fresh, positive energy is essential- but that can be difficult to maintain if you shift all your energy away from your mental health. “You have to be careful not to overdo the volunteer hours because it can take its toll,” says Molly. “I try to limit myself to 3-4 hour shifts when I volunteer, as tempting as it may be to stay three times as long.”

Molly encourages volunteers to maintain agency and find a healthy work climate that suits you. When it gets frustrating, get some air and remind yourself why you’re doing this.

“These refugees have a long way to go - years. There are tremendous demands on them to integrate and build a meaningful life while they recover from trauma and loss and struggle to assimilate into this new culture, while also finding a place for the expression of their cultural heritage. I am optimistic about what they have to contribute and teach all of us,” Molly says. “While the contribution I make feels like a mere drop in very large ocean, at least it’s one drop.”

**THINK OF ANOTHER WAY
TO HELP REFUGEES?
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