



Judi Harris  
June 14, 2020  
Refugee Awareness Sunday

Hello friends. For those that don't know me, I am Judi Harris. I am an elder at this church and I am the director of Refugee Services for St. Vincent Catholic Charities.

I want to start with thanking everyone for participating in this Refugee Sunday event. We have so much going on right now that it is important to remember that there are so many people still out there who are really vulnerable. According to the United Nations, there are over 71 million people around the world who have been forced from their homes and almost 30 million of them have fled their countries and are officially refugees. And they are very at-risk of illness, natural disasters and other tragedies. Covid 19 has found them, too. In fact, according to the United Nations, 134 refugee-hosting countries have reported local transmission of Covid 19.

In many cases, refugees live in overcrowded camps and lack access to adequate healthcare, shelter, water and sanitation, making it very difficult for relief workers and health workers to protect them from disease. According to the International Rescue committee, coronavirus transmission rates in some of the refugee camps in Greece, Syria and Bangladesh could be even faster than those seen on some of the cruise ships. But an estimated 80% are sheltered outside camps, often in overcrowded communities with little access to health care and almost no way to quarantine themselves or practice social distancing. And it looks like resettlement will not be a solution, at least not for the rest of this year.

Refugee resettlement was already in a crisis due to policies of the current administration. But with the pandemic, the situation is much worse. So refugees overseas continue to be separated from their families and living in insecure environments, subject to harassment, assault and poor health conditions.

This year was set to have the lowest number of refugees resettled in the US since the beginning of the program over 40 years ago. Only 18,000 refugees were projected to arrive and most of those were divided up into select groups of people. Under the Obama administration, an average of 85,000 refugees were resettled every year.

Then resettlement essentially stopped this past March. Very few refugees have been able to make it through. Only emergency cases. And no more are expected through the end of the fiscal year. Less than 7,600 have arrived in the US so far, not even half of the 18,000 target. In Lansing, we haven't seen a new arrival since February. That means that our total number of arrivals in Lansing will end at 57 for fiscal year 2020. We normally resettle an average 500-600 people. That's a 90% reduction.

Meanwhile, refugees here in Lansing continue to be part of the essential workforce. They work in warehouses, food production, stores, manufacturing, hospitals and nursing homes.

At St Vincent's we have been very busy working with the folks that we have recently resettled. We started by calling the elderly and medically challenged to educate them about how to protect themselves. By now, we have called or tried to call everyone who had arrived in the past 5 years. Just like the rest of us, they are scared. Like the rest of the community, some have tested positive, some have gotten sick and sadly, some have died.

They are also struggling to pay their rent and we are helping those that lost their jobs to apply for unemployment.

And they are worried about their children's education. Hoping that they caught up enough and learned enough English to get them set up to learn on their own from home. St. Vincent's has been working on developing and implementing remote educational programs for refugees, including ESL. And some of our wonderful volunteers have joined together to create a tutor's circle to help adults and kids stay engaged and moving forward in learning.

We have also partnered with Ingham County Health Department to provide language support for community coronavirus testing events and to help communicate with patients and their contacts.

These past few weeks, resettled refugees in our communities have also been learning lessons on civics. They are watching and often joining their neighbors in the streets protesting against racial injustice, which for some was the very reason they had to flee their country of origin. The images of violence on the news are all too familiar to many refugees and some are being retraumatized by what they are seeing. Most refugees resettled in the US can fall into the category of "marginalized minorities." 61% of St. Vincent's arrivals over the past five years came from Africa. Many trusted and dreamed that they were coming to a place of peace, justice and fairness. Although they are so very grateful to be here, they also join us in uniting against brutality in any form. Wanting peace is something we all have in common.

Thank you again for letting me share this short update. We are all praying together to get through these trying times and to help our brothers and sisters from all over the world.