



# WELCOMING ACTIONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

## HOST A #REFUGEESWELCOME DINNER OR EVENT

Sharing a meal together is a timeless tradition that cuts across all cultures and religions. The act of inviting recently arrived immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers into the hospitality of a communal meal holds immense meaning; it offers a welcoming space to get to know and learn from one another. #RefugeesWelcome events can include more than a meal – celebrations of cultural traditions such as music, dance, or story-telling can be very welcoming. #RefugeesWelcome events not only show hospitality – they can also influence local social and political attitudes about refugee resettlement and put pressure on our representatives to be more welcoming.

Many community groups and congregations have hosted welcome dinners that also double as fundraising events to collect donations and funds to help refugees rebuild their lives in the United States.

Note that it's important to consider #RefugeesWelcome events that include all refugees. While the crisis in Syria has opened many peoples' eyes to the needs of refugees, many other refugee communities, who have suffered equally but received less publicity, will be happy to be included in your event.

## ADVANCE PLANNING GUIDELINES FOR A SUCCESSFUL #REFUGEEWELCOME EVENT:

- 1. Determine your capacity.** Begin by seeing how many members of your group or congregation want to be involved, and if the congregation or college will officially endorse your work to support refugees.
- 2. Contact your local resettlement agency.** Find out if they would be interested in partnering with you, and if they know families who would want to attend.
- 3. Invite the interfaith community to help with the planning.** Be sure to include Jewish and Muslim faith leaders in your event. Plan far enough in advance to have a few joint meetings and distribute roles among partners. Divide tasks for outreach, cooking/food, taking pictures, and other logistics.
- 4. Be in touch with grassroots organizations.** Some families who have come to the U.S. seeking asylum, particularly Central American families, do not receive support from resettlement agencies (see FAQs). The best way to reach them and extend an invitation to your #RefugeesWelcome event is to contact grassroots immigrant rights organizations near you, which are likely to have relationships in the Central American community. If you have trouble identifying a local immigrant rights partner, please feel free to contact UUSC at [mobilization@uusc.org](mailto:mobilization@uusc.org) to collaborate.
- 5. Register your event.** Once you have the resettlement office and faith/community leaders committed to assisting with the event, let us at UUSC know about your plans, and add your event to the IIC's #RefugeesWelcome page at [bit.ly/WelcomeWeekendReg](http://bit.ly/WelcomeWeekendReg).
- 6. Identify the best space for the event.** It may be a church, mosque, temple, school, or community center.
- 7. Invite refugees to speak.** Ask the resettlement agency if any of the refugees attending would be interested in speaking. Depending on the circumstances, any kind of public speaking may not be appropriate for families who have just arrived. Instead, invite someone who is more settled and perhaps has become a leader within the community.
- 8. Invite your representatives to attend.** Remember to include both local and federal officials to attend and offer messages of support against anti-refugee legislation. Visibility of our elected officials on refugee issues is very important in our increasingly polarized political environment.
- 9. Plan for translation/interpretation.** Consider what kinds of translation are going to be necessary, both for speakers and for conversations at tables. Prepare icebreaker questions or activities for small groups at tables. Several cities have volunteer "interpreter collaboratives" who are willing to interpret at events like these for free.
- 10. Include an action attendees can do after the event.** This may be writing letters, signing pre-printed postcards to representatives, or signing a petition (see Influencing Legislation section for ideas).
- 11. Plan ahead for follow-up.** Welcome Dinners are not one-time events – they are a starting point for bridge building and deeper connections. Have a way non-refugee participants can sign up to learn more about volunteering. Encourage families to exchange contact information if they are interested. If there is major pro- or anti-refugee legislation coming up soon, invite participants to reconvene for a planning meeting to influence the outcome.

## HELPFUL TIPS FOR MAKING REFUGEES FEEL WELCOME AT YOUR #REFUGEEWELCOME EVENT:

- **Avoid food that is not allowed under some refugees' religion.** In particular, be careful to avoid pork and any pork-based ingredients and gelatin for Muslim and Jewish guests. A full guide on halal food restrictions can be found here: [utsc.utoronto.ca/~facilities/documents/GuidetoHalalFoods.pdf](http://utsc.utoronto.ca/~facilities/documents/GuidetoHalalFoods.pdf).
- **Try to include food that comes from the different traditions of refugees who will be attending.** If your resources only allow for a potluck among the hosts, that's fine. Consider purchasing from a local restaurant that serves the foods of the refugee communities attending (they may offer a discount if you explain the purpose), or talk to the resettlement agency and see if there may be refugees who do catering that you can hire for the event.
- **Determine photography protocol and be sensitive about taking photos.** Discuss in advance with the resettlement agency whether any kind of photography is appropriate – it may not be, based on culture or fear of potential reprisal and violence toward relatives in refugees' home countries. Make sure everyone knows to only take pictures after asking for permission. If you plan to use photos for publications or websites, make sure that you get photo releases signed – but also make sure everyone fully understands the release (use interpreters when necessary). A sample release form is included in the "Resources" section.
- **Make a media and social media plan.** Depending on how photography is to be handled, decide whether you want to invite local press to cover the event. If you do, make sure refugees provide consent for your plans, including the specific media representatives you invite. Remember, refugees may not feel comfortable with their stories being shared publicly, since identifying information could bring harm to family members back in their home countries. If it makes sense, share promotion and stories on social media.
- **Consider incorporating music, art, or dance.** Be sure to represent the countries from which your group is welcoming new arrivals. Consider finding and learning a welcome song important to the culture/s of refugees honored in your event. One example is the ancient Arabic welcome song used when Prophet Mohammed was a refugee to Medina, called "Tala'al-Badru'alayna."
- **Ask non-refugee participants to focus questions on interests and commonalities.** Too often, refugees who have been through trauma are asked to tell their story over and over. You want your guests to enjoy an event where they feel welcomed as their whole selves, without the expectation that they will revisit difficult memories, either as part of your program or during informal interactions with other participants. It isn't superficial to talk about food, sports, music, or even celebrities – these conversations create a shared space where our guests can feel normal and connected.
- **Be careful to respect refugees' own religious traditions.** Avoid incorporating religious expression that could feel like proselytizing. For example, if you plan to say grace for a meal, provide the opportunity for prayers to be offered from every religion in the room.
- **Provide action and advocacy ideas for follow-ups.** Attendees will feel inspired for next steps following your event. Be ready to offer opportunities for ongoing relationships with and support for refugee families, and to promote positive public policies and perspectives about refugees.
- **Screen the documentary, "Welcome to Shelbyville,"** is a story of how sharing a dinner can break down barriers and transform communities.

### STORIES FROM A REFUGEE SOLIDARITY FAMILY DINNER

In early 2016, First Parish UU Church of Dorchester in Boston, Mass., hosted a "Refugee Solidarity Family Dinner" organized by Dorchester People for Peace. We served an array of Middle Eastern food, much of which was donated by local restaurants owned by people who have immigrated from the region. Participants included several Syrian families who arrived in the United States at different times over recent decades. They shared their own experiences coming to this country, their impressions of the causes of the current crisis, and what could be done to address it. Some also relayed the experiences of family members who are still in Syria or have recently fled. A local activist who teaches courses on U.S. foreign policy provided an understanding of the geopolitical context of this human rights crisis. I reported on my recent experiences volunteering with refugee solidarity efforts at the borders of Greece. By sharing photos, stories, and an on-the-ground perspective, I wanted to help put a human face on what's happening and highlight the ways that refugees I met are demonstrating empowerment, courage, collective strength, and resilience amidst extremely adverse and unjust circumstances.

Participants signed petitions and discussed other action steps to take, including legislative advocacy for peace and support for the resettlement of more refugees in the United States. More than 120 people attended, including many children who made colorful cards with messages of peace, hope, and welcome, which were later distributed to children at refugee camps overseas. The event also included music, dance, and a gallery of drawings by youth from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. It was covered in the local newspaper and helped build new relationships, collaborations, and understanding in the community, leading to a subsequent event on confronting Islamophobia and building solidarity with Muslim Americans.

- Angela Kelly, Dorchester, MA

