



The following letter is for parishes throughout Maine and is in response to recent items in the press that have led to confusion about Catholic Charities Maine's Refugee & Immigration Services (RIS) program. We would like to take this opportunity to clarify the role of our agency, how it is funded, and the number of refugees assisted through the program.

A refugee is a person unable to return to their country of origin because of a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, gender, etc. Many of the refugees who have been resettled were victims of war or genocide and lived in refugee camps for up to 10 years awaiting resettlement. Many of the refugee children were born in camps and have never known stability or their native homes.

We have heard commentary from the community that RIS is thought to take money and aid "out of the hands of Mainers." We would like to correct this misconception. RIS is financed by a number of grants, almost all of which are federal and are either allocated directly from Washington, DC, or are funneled through Maine's Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of Multicultural Affairs. All of the federal grants that RIS currently receives are specific to meeting the needs of refugees being resettled in the U.S. and cannot be applied for by U.S. citizens or other immigrant groups. There is only one grant from a local agency, which represents 1% of our total funding.

In addition, we often hear that Mainers believe we seek out refugees to come to Maine. The reality is that the U.S. State Department works with the United Nations to provide resettlement opportunities for refugees. In 2009, the U.S. Government agreed to accept a maximum of 80,000 refugees; of this 80,000, RIS was assigned approximately 230 primary refugees to be resettled.

The actual number of refugees that arrive in Maine is determined annually by RIS' completion of a capacity survey that is approved by the State Department. The survey assesses the refugee populations who are already here, patterns of outmigration, the housing market, the employment market, access to health care, languages spoken and available interpreters, staff to client ratios, etc. Based on recent trends, we estimate 200-270 arrivals per year over the next few years, as mandated by the federal government.

When refugees arrive in Maine, RIS case managers find and prepare housing, furnish homes with donated furniture, buy food that is culturally appropriate, assist with access to health care, employment, enrolling their children in schools and referring adults to English language learning programs. Our goal is to help all refugee arrivals to rebuild their lives in Maine after years of trauma and uncertainty, while actively supporting them in achieving their own self-sufficiency.

As Catholics we are called to "welcome the stranger among us" and build solidarity with our brothers and sisters. In working with refugees we have an opportunity to live out this baptismal call. We appreciate your support and understanding of this very important program and invite you to visit us at www.ccmaine.org for more information. We hope you can use this information in your conversations with others who do not understand the mission of Catholic Charities Maine.

"Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was . . . a stranger and you welcomed me." (Mt 25:34-35)