

Local Temples, Agencies, Resettling Syrian Refugees

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By Sara Lustberg



Rabbi Daniel Liben

FRAMINGHAM – Several local congregations are working with two Jewish agencies to resettle a dozen Syrian refugee families in the MetroWest area.

Twelve-to-14 Syrian families, almost all of which have one-to-three children of preschool-to-elementary school age, should arrive late this month, according to Marc Jacobs, CEO of Framingham-based Jewish Family Services of MetroWest and Bill Swersey, a spokesman for the national organization HIAS, which has an office in Boston.

The working class families fled the civil war in Syria for the safety of neighboring Jordan five years ago, they said. Many of the children were barely a year or two old when they left Syria, they said, and some were born outside the shattered country.

“Jewish Family Services invited synagogues from Greater Boston and MetroWest to participate based upon each’s already expressed social justice interest in the plight of refugees,” Jacobs said.



Marc Jacobs

“Each had already engaged with HIAS at the social justice level,” he said. “Each participating synagogue proudly chose to become involved with this humanitarian outpouring of caring. Several rabbis have poignant High Holiday sermons speaking to its importance. This is JFS led, but it is broader and deeper than just synagogues as partners.”

Jacobs said he was not at liberty to release the list of congregations participating in the resettlement effort. “A number of the temples do not want publicity for their efforts,” he noted. “[They] just want to do great work without recognition.”

Jacobs said many other institutions are participating in the resettlement effort, including academic institutions and universities; interfaith communities; medical

institutions; and the Syrian American Medical Society.



Bill Swersey

However, The Jewish Advocate has identified two of the congregations involved in the effort.

“Our synagogue decided to partner with JFS on this project because, as Jews, we identified with the humanitarian need,” noted Temple Israel of Natick’s Rabbi Daniel Liben in an email. “I really believe that the resettlement work that HIAS does is holy work. Some of our members were actively involved in Soviet-Jewish resettlement a generation ago, and others recall their own family’s immigrant experience.

“We decided that, when faced with a real family with real needs, the Jewish thing to do is to help them,” Liben added. “You can’t let fear paralyze you from doing the right thing.”

Fourteen months ago, four members of Temple Beth Elohim in Wellesley began an effort to assist refugees forced from their homes due to the war in Syria, according to its website.



The bedroom being prepared for a Syrian immigrant child

PHOTO: JEWISH FAMILY SERVICES OF METROWEST

“As the U.S. was not admitting refugees at that time, funds were raised to assist a synagogue in Toronto, which was resettling five refugee families,” notes the website. “The Syrian Refugee Resettlement Team... has now grown to over 80 members and is preparing to welcome two families into our own communities.”

Temple members Michael Gilman and Susan Posner are coordinating the resettlement effort for Beth Elohim; however, they declined interview requests from The Jewish Advocate.

According to its website, Beth Elohim hopes to raise \$50,000 to cover one year’s rent and other living expenses for two refugee families.

“A temple family provided a \$25,000 challenge gift that matched dollar-for-dollar all donations received to date,” notes the website. “Another temple family has covered the costs of a fundraising concert performed by Noah Aronson and his band to be held at the temple on Sunday, Dec. 18 at 7 p.m.” Tickets are available at TBEWellesley.org/SyrianRefugees. Jacobs and Swersey spoke to the vetting process that the refugees went through in order to enter the U.S.

Citing government agencies, they said the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program vets refugees extensively and repeatedly over an 18-to-24 month period. Multiple branches of the U.S. government investigate potential immigrants, including the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, the State Department and the National Counterterrorism Center. Any agency may disqualify a refugee for any reason, they said.

“No other entrants to the U.S. are scrutinized as thoroughly as refugees,” Jacobs said. Swersey agreed.

Another participant in the resettlement effort is Dr. Riad Cachecho, chair of the department of surgery at MetroWest Medical Center in Framingham.

A member of the founding committee of the New England chapter of the Arab American Medical Association, Cachecho also has connections with the American Syrian Medical Association.

“I was introduced to Marc [Jacobs] by a mutual friend who was familiar with my cultural background,” Cachecho told The Advocate by email. “I was humbled by the invitation to collaborate with JFS on resettling Syrian refugees in our area.”

Cachecho noted the agency consulted with him on cultural and religious issues, and asked him to reach out to the local Middle Eastern community for support of the refugees.

“I have been impressed by JFS preparedness for this significant project,” he wrote, noting the agency has already put in place resources for the refugees such as cultural and social support; PTSD treatments; English lessons; and physical and mental work assessments.

“They also secured housing in middle class areas with support from the local Jewish community,” Cachecho noted.

Cachecho noted he “only received positive reactions” from “all my Middle Eastern friends and acquaintances.”

“We will be setting up fundraising activities in local churches,” he noted. “We already have support from the local Lyons Clubs, as well as from the Syrian Benevolent Association, among other social entities. We will be reaching out to landlords and to local businesses to provide housing at a reasonable cost, as well as jobs based on the refugees’ physical and educational abilities.”

Nicholas Covino, president of William James College, a graduate school of psychology located in Newton, is also involved in the resettlement effort.

“We are the partner that is providing the mental health support for staff and the project,” he noted in an email. “We have a number of our graduate students and faculty who are multilingual and interested in this area of mental health and compassionate care.” The college “has experience in working with trauma and people from multicultural backgrounds,” he noted.

When asked why HIAS – which in 2014 changed its name from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society – was helping non-Jewish Syrian refugees, Swersey replied, “Who knows more about being a refugee than Jews? Many will do everything they can to help those in need, no matter what the situation is.”

Both Swersey and Jacobs disagreed with the suggestion that HIAS no longer serves Jewish refugees.

“HIAS and hundreds of Jewish community organizations across the United States work and support Jews, and they support others as well,” Swersey said.

“In our Greater Boston community,” Jacobs said, “whether it is Jewish Community Housing for the Elderly, Jewish Vocational Service, Hebrew SeniorLife, B’nai B’rith Housing, my own agency and so on, we are each enormously proud to serve Jews as well as many other members of our community.

“HIAS is very much a Jewish agency,” he continued, “run by and strongly supported by Jews and synagogues across the U.S.

“HIAS does still resettle Jews,” he noted. “This past year, HIAS resettled Jewish refugees from the former Soviet Union, Iran, Yemen and Iraq.

“However,” Jacobs concluded, “today, HIAS proudly resettles refugees of all faiths and nationalities, as a strong expression of our deeply held Jewish values and commandment to ‘welcome the stranger.’”

Swersey’s comments echoed previous statements made by HIAS President Mark Hetfield, who has said, “We are an agency motivated by Jewish values in order to protect refugees.”

“We used to help refugees because they were Jewish; today, we help refugees because we are Jewish,” Hetfield has said.

When asked whether his view on helping the refugees changed after the election of Donald Trump, Cachecho replied, “Although politics will play a significant role in the future of this project, we, the American people, need to focus on the needs of the refugees who just became part of this great nation.

“We need to treat them with respect and with dignity,” he said.

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