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20 Northeast Ohio Catholic parishes set to welcome Ukrainian refugee families

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20 Ukrainian families will be welcomed to Greater Cleveland as 20 Catholic parishes step up to provide them with support as part of an initiative by Catholic Charities - Diocese of Cleveland. (AP Photo/Renata Brito)AP

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By

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CLEVELAND, Ohio – As Russia’s war on Ukraine nears its one-year anniversary, the United Nations says that more than [12 million Ukrainian families](#) have fled their homes seeking refuge across the globe. Twenty of those families will soon call Cleveland home, as part of an outreach program spearheaded by the [Catholic Charities - Diocese of Cleveland](#).

According to Heath Rosenberger, the director of migration and refugee services for the agency, the first family -- a mother, father and three young children -- arrived in Cleveland Sunday, welcomed by [St. Joseph’s Parish in Strongsville](#).

A second family, sponsored by [Brunswick’s St. Ambrose](#) parish, is expected to arrive within the month.

Classified by the US government as “[humanitarian parolees](#),” the families may stay in this country for up to two years.

“This initiative got started because, in the beginning of the war, we had numerous parishioners reach out to us asking how they could help. They were already donating to relief agencies but wanted to do so much more,” Rosenberger said

The federal government in the spring established a program called “[Uniting for Ukraine](#),” which allowed family members, friends, or concerned individuals to sponsor Ukrainians to come, Rosenberger said. The [US Conference of Catholic Bishops](#) chose the Cleveland diocese to start a community sponsorship program.

The [Diocese of Cleveland](#) is the 23rd largest in the country, home to more than 613,000 Catholic Northeast Ohios in Cuyahoga, Summit, Lorain, Lake, Geauga, Medina, Wayne and Ashland counties.

Enter Sarah Murphy – the volunteer coordinator for Welcome Services with the Cleveland’s Catholic Charities organization – who immediately starting contacting parishes across the Dioceses to recruit as many as 20 of the 185 parishes would step up to sponsor a family.

“Before they signed on, we wanted to sure they understood that this was a two-year commitment: taking on the responsibility of assisting their family in all the aspects of daily life, especially for the first 3 – 6 months, and that it could entail a potential financial commitment as well,” Murphy said.

Parishes are connecting with potential sponsee families through their own grassroots networks – or through [Welcome.US](#), a website connecting Ukranian refugees who have no other way out.

“At first, we expected a lot of single mothers with children from the Eastern end of the country where the front lines were to be applying since many of the men were staying behind to fight. But as the war continues, and attacks are more and more centered on civilian infrastructure, we are seeing families from all over the country apply just because the situation is so dire in Ukraine right now.”

Rosenberger said. “Just last month, more than nine million people were without electricity in the winter.”

Cleveland already ranked in the top 10 nationally when it came to working with Uniting for Ukraine for help supplied to individual refugees. Catholic Charities – Cleveland Diocese had already helped 500 Ukrainians with benefits and getting jobs in Northeast Ohio.

“This program is pretty much unlike anything we have worked with before. Sponsors would be taking on more active role in the lives of their family – finding housing, meeting family at the airport, providing transportation, helping them learn and navigate Cleveland’s public transportation system, help register the kids in school, and helping them to find ways to connect and integrate into the community.

“We have a number of Ukrainian speakers on staff, and contractors, to assist with language barriers for those who don’t speak English, but a good majority of those who are applying have some grasp of the English language,” he said.

But the parish is not alone in its’ sponsorship. Catholic Charities stands ready to provide employment services, as well as rental and utilities assistance where needed. In addition, Catholic Charities will provide emotional support and counseling to help them overcome the traumas of war.

Once they arrive, refugee families are not expected to unite with the Catholic parish sponsoring them but are free to seek out another spiritual home – or none at all.

“We are open to working with individuals, other agencies, or other churches who want to get involved,” said Rosenberger. “This is really a community effort.

“The good thing about Cleveland is that we are a city of immigrants. That history goes back many years. We are fortunate to live in a city where the people are very welcoming and supportive when it comes bringing a stranger in and making them feel at home. And that is something we can all be very proud of.”



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