

Buncombe OKs refugee efforts

Catholic Charities Diocese of Charlotte continues its refugee resettlement program

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ASHEVILLE – Buncombe has granted the Catholic Charities Diocese of Charlotte permission to continue its refugee resettlement program in the county.

Due to a new step added via a September executive order from President Donald Trump, the diocese was required to get written consent from the local government and that of the state to continue work it has undertaken for years.

At its Jan. 7 meeting, Buncombe's board of commissioners voted unanimously to provide that consent.

Gov. Roy Cooper provided consent as well in early December.

A refugee is someone who has fled their country of nationality because of a "well-founded" fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political beliefs or membership in a particular social group.

Refugee resettlement in Buncombe

Refugee resettlement and assistance through case management is one of a wide range of services provided by the Catholic Charities Diocese of Charlotte, according to the organization's website. The nonprofit social service organization follows the teachings of the Catholic Church and has regional offices in Asheville, Charlotte, and Winston-Salem and satellite locations in Greensboro and Murphy.

In her appeal to Buncombe — by way of a November letter to County Manager Avril Pinder in November —

Catholic Charities regional director Sandra Buck said the organization reunited 44 refugees with their families in Buncombe in 2018 through a program that she calls "life-saving."

"As you know, the refugee resettlement program has had a long history here in Buncombe County thanks to widespread community support," Buck wrote. "Refugee

resettlement has economically and culturally enriched the community, and has brought substantial value through a public-private partnership.”

300 refugees resettled in 3 years

Buck also spoke to the board at its Dec. 17 pre-meeting. She said Catholic Charities and other organizations have been resettling refugees in Buncombe for about 40 years. The nonprofit’s office in Asheville employs a case coordinator who was a Russian refugee herself.

“We’ve resettled about 300 refugees here in the last three years,” said Buck. “The majority of them are placed in Buncombe County because they are coming here to join their family that already lives here.”

Buck said the refugees are from Russia, Ukraine and Moldova.

“As soon as they arrive, they can petition to bring their family members that they left behind,” she said. “That process takes a couple of years, but once they’re approved to travel, then they typically will resettle with what we call their ‘U.S. tie’ or their anchor family. ... They’re well supported. A lot of them come and they start their own businesses. They employ their family members immediately.”

Refugees pay taxes, repay expenses

The United States limits the number of refugees accepted for resettlement each year, Catholic Charities explains on its website. After the State Department arranges for safe travel of refugees, they are assisted by local resettlement agencies and refugee service providers.

“The primary goal of the resettlement process is to help refugees work toward self-sufficiency as contributing members of society and, eventually, attain their citizenship,” the nonprofit’s website says. “Refugees pay taxes and re-pay their travel expenses.”

Most adults who are able to work find employment within three to five months, according the organization. Most gain financial independence within two to three years and 60-75 percent eventually become homeowners.