CIRCLES OF FRIENDS OF REFUGEE FAMILIES

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Overview

A "Circle of Friends" is a small group of volunteers who commit to working together to welcome and befriend a refugee (aka "New American") family. They help the family become integrated into their new community, with the knowledge and skills they require to be independent. Some Circles stay actively connected with their family for years. A Circle may have as little as three or four to as many as ten or more members of varying ages and backgrounds.

In most cases, refugee families have been assisted initially by their "entry agency." The entry agency for Concord, Ascentria Care Alliance (formerly Lutheran Social Services), which is funded in part by U.S. Government contracts, ensures that the families are safely settled upon arrival in the U.S. It is responsible for getting the families housed, provided with initial furnishings and clothing, and enrolled to receive public benefits and services such as rent and financial assistance, food stamps, Medicaid and child care. Ascentria coordinates the enrollment of school-age children in public schools, provides employment assistance, offers English language classes, and holds introductory classes to orient these newcomers to practical issues of living in the U.S.

Pastor Clement Kigugu, formerly an Ascentria staff member, founded Overcomers Refugee Services (ORS) to provide ongoing support to New American families after Ascentria's assistance winds down after a few months. Many families need support for years before they are fully integrated and self-sufficient. UUFOR Circle members team with Ascentria and ORS staff to assist families they serve.

What Circles Do

- **Help adults learn English**...to supplement the entry agency's ongoing language (ESOL) classes for refugees. School-age children pick up English quickly at school. But their parents and adult family members struggle to learn English, including letters and numbers, and they need practice and drilling beyond what they can get in the classes. Because employability usually depends on at least minimal language ability, ESOL tutoring is among the most important Circle functions. Ascentria and another organization here in Concord, Second Start, offer language classes, tutoring and resources such as books and lesson materials.

- **Monitor family mail and business**…Because the adults usually don't speak or read English, they need help reviewing and responding to rent and other bills, school notices, and agency mail concerning benefits such as Medicaid, food stamps, child care, Head Start, and fuel assistance.

- **Help find employment**…The entry agency helps its clients prepare for and find employment, but volunteers are needed to help follow up job leads, introduce candidates to potential employers, and be personal references. (A sizable number of area companies, staffing agencies, nurseries and farms hire New Americans.)

- **Provide transportation, and help family learn to use public transportation systems and get their driver's licenses**...These families often need help getting to shops, medical appointments, language classes, child care, and other places. They commonly find friends or extended family to help them get around, but not always. Circle volunteers can be enormously helpful by providing shopping and other transportation that is planned and scheduled in advance; by riding with them on local buses so they learn the routes, fares, and stops; by teaching them to use other transport services such as rides to medical appointments that are covered by Medicaid; and by helping them learn to drive, enroll in driver's ed classes, and deal with DMV to get their license.

- **Help family navigate public agencies, medical services and schools**… Ascentria and ORS staff help the families access public agencies such as the NH Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Concord City Welfare, the Belknap-Merrimack Community Action Program (CAP), Concord Hospital and its Family Health Center (Medicaid clinic), and the public schools. But volunteers can be helpful supplements to over-stretched staff by being advocates in agency meetings, filling out agency paperwork, and monitoring and responding to agency mail and notices. Volunteers will require training in this area.

- **Have fun and fellowship**… Just being friends, getting to know each other and having fun together, are among the most important things volunteers can offer to help refugees feel welcome and at home. Things like reading and games (especially with pre-school children), birthday parties, going hiking or to the beach or to events and gatherings, etc.

- **Other things Circle members teach and do**:
    - Letters (the alphabet) and numbers and how to write them
    - How to keep a calendar
    - How to keep time
    - How to understand and compare prices
    - How to budget, manage money, use a bank account/write checks
    - How to read a map
    - How to fill out typical forms (name, address, DOB, contacts, etc.)
    - How to call for emergency services (police, fire, medical, etc.)

How Circles Work

When a Circle works as it should, no one person carries a disproportionate load. Tasks and task areas are divided among the group according to individual talents and time availabilities. One person may be a natural organizer and multi-tasker, with more time than others, and willing to be the coordinator. Others might take on specific tasks such as language tutoring, driving, job networking, or advocacy with public agencies. Some might be able to commit only an hour or two a week, while others might give three or even five or more hours. It is better to start small and set limits than to take on too much and then burn out and drop out. Each Circle should convene periodically for social gatherings sharing meals or fun activities, and also check in to debrief, share questions and concerns, coordinate, and feel like a team. In addition, Circle members are encouraged to participate in periodic UUFOR gatherings where multiple Circles come together to learn from each other.

Every Circle should strive to enhance its family's independence and self-reliance. Each Circle should devise an "exit strategy," with the ultimate goal of working itself out of a job – when the family is no longer relying on the Circle's regular assistance, but only in want of its members' lasting friendship.