

# Central Americans seeking asylum find homes in Arkansas

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |



## How you can help

For those who want to donate money to Catholic Immigration Services — Little Rock to the four families who were separated at the border for two months, but have now been reunited and are settled in Arkansas or have questions about donating items, contact Verkamp at [jverkamp@dolr.org](mailto:jverkamp@dolr.org).

When a child lies down to sleep, nightmares can seep into their peaceful dreams. Though a parent, relative or caregiver can often calm them, for a 5-year-old girl who was kept in immigration detention for two months separated from her family, little can be done to console real fears that still linger.

While she still cries for her mother in Guatemala, the child's father is working hard to build a stable life for her in Arkansas. Catholic Immigration Services — Little Rock is providing social work services to them and three other families through a contract with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"It was like Jesus saying, 'Let the little children come to me.' They're like little rays of light, so we brought them in and we are better for it." Kristy Dunn, principal of St. Theresa School in Little Rock

"Everyone just immediately said, 'Yes, we'll do this' because I think it was something that just

in the summer, it hit everybody in some shape or form,” Jennifer Verkamp, director of Catholic Immigration Services — Little Rock said regarding family separations at the border.

## **Reuniting families**

Migration and Refugee Services, part of the USCCB, helped facilitate the reunification of most children separated from their parents at the border during the federal family separation policy, which was in place from April until June 20. President Donald Trump signed an executive order to halt his policy after intense public backlash.

From there, families were sponsored by relatives or friends throughout the country with eight children in Arkansas. USCCB reached out to Catholic Charities of Arkansas to assist in social work services for a 90-day period. Once a contract is ended, Immigration Services will be reimbursed \$1,500 per family through the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement for the hours and expenses it took to provide those services. Calls to the families began in August.

Verkamp said she was able to reach four families in Central Arkansas to guide them toward sources for food, education for their children, employment, accessing safety and health and finding a lawyer for legal assistance of their immigration cases. Families who are being helped were seeking asylum at the border and proceedings are ongoing for some.

“I’ve heard stories from some of them that they are fleeing some violence and persecution. They’ve had family members that have been murdered around them. But for a lot of them, it is extreme poverty,” she said of the Guatemalan and Honduran families.

## **Treating trauma**

The children, who now have been reunited with at least one parent, are 5, 10 and two 12-year-olds. Catholic Charities is also trying to assist a 16-year-old still in detention in Arizona, which occurred after the family separation policy ended. Each child was separated from their parents for at least two months, Verkamp said.

“I think with a lot of them it was such a traumatic experience they really don’t talk about it,” Verkamp said, adding “It’s more, ‘OK we’ll put that behind us and let’s think what can we do now that you’re here’ and trying to kind of go forward. They haven’t really seemed to want to discuss it.”

Verkamp said she has met with the families many times and area organizations like Helping Hand of Greater Little Rock and nonprofit Settled Souls have stepped up to provide food and beds. Parishes like St. Theresa Church in Little Rock and St. Mary Church in Batesville have donated or offered to donate items and services. At least one child is seeing a therapist.

## **St. Theresa steps up**

St. Theresa Church and School in Little Rock have done “a ton,” going above and beyond to

help, Verkamp said. Kristy Dunn, principal at St. Theresa, has provided full scholarships, supplies, uniforms and other necessities to two children. One of the fathers will begin serving during Mass at St. Theresa, Verkamp said.

"I think what resonated with me," Dunn said. "I had seen the news coverage of the separation of children at the border and I felt pretty strongly that was unjust especially with our faith, but I didn't know what to do to help the situation. So when Jennifer presented us with this need, and in consultation with our pastor Father Mark Wood, we said let's do it ... It was like Jesus saying, 'Let the little children come to me.' They're like little rays of light, so we brought them in and we are better for it."

Dunn said two parish families have "adopted" the families separated at the border and often babysit and pickup and drop off at school. School supplies were donated in part by Pax Christi Little Rock and Dunn's own children donated toys, clothes and the church has made donations as well.

"I can't overstate how well they're doing. They smile, they're engaged in the learning to the extent their English allows ... we are a safe place," Dunn said and fellow students have treated them like brothers and sisters.

Verkamp said even the 5-year-old child said she wanted "to learn how to read" and used all 15 or so of her new hairclips to look pretty on the first day of school.

"She tells me specifically every time I pick her up that she has a new friend and she tells me the friend's name," Verkamp said.

## **'Something I can do'**

Being able to help these families has been a bright spot for Verkamp, who saw the desperation first hand on a trip to the U.S.-Mexico border in June.

"After being at the border and seeing those families and thinking about that all the time and wanting to do something, it was so amazing when we were presented with this program and this option to join. I was so thrilled because I felt like, OK now there's finally something small that I can contribute to, that I can do. So that was really wonderful," she said.