

# 75 new refugees make their home in Arkansas

written by Arkansas Catholic Staff |



The Refugee Resettlement Program under Catholic Charities of Arkansas completed its first year as an “affiliate office” for the Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) Office for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Sept. 30.

The USCCB MRS Office has a national network of refugee resettlement programs run mostly by local Catholic Charities agencies that resettle people with refugee status who are vetted and assigned by the U.S. State Department.

In the past year, the Diocese of Little Rock’s Refugee Resettlement Program welcomed 27 families, totaling 75 people, from Honduras, Guatemala, Venezuela, Afghanistan and Nicaragua.

Jennifer Verkamp-Ruthven, director of the Refugee Resettlement Program, said she is grateful for the support from the Catholic community in the Diocese of Little Rock.

“It is a privilege for us to be able to ‘welcome the stranger,’ which would not be possible without the generous support that we receive in multiple ways,” she said.

Families and individuals who are received are welcomed at the airport and provided with services intended to help them become self-sufficient once they have had a chance to secure adequate employment. The services provided by the Catholic Charities refugee resettlement

staff and volunteers include assisting with finding housing and helping with short-term rental assistance, offering employment counseling and help with securing jobs, assisting with enrolling children in school, arranging for health care services and assisting with adapting to a new culture and learning the English language.

Claire Hollenbeck, refugee resettlement resource coordinator, views her Catholic faith and work as connected.

“The work we do with our clients, it truly fulfills the teaching of Jesus as found in the Gospel of St. Matthew — ‘When did we see you a stranger and welcome you? ... Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.’”

Reflecting on the work of the diocesan Refugee Resettlement Program over the past year, Dennis Lee, executive director for Catholic Charities of Arkansas, said, “The people with refugee status that we welcome and assist are homeless and without a country until we take them in. There are hundreds of thousands of refugees around the world who would like to resettle in the United States, and only a small number of them receive this opportunity from our government, and just a very few, fortunate people make it to Arkansas. We are proud to represent the Catholic community in our diocese with our refugee resettlement work.”