

Moment for Mission: Welcome the Stranger

Sunday, June 1, 2025, offered by Rebecca LaBarr

First United Presbyterian ("Red Door" Church), Oneonta, NY



The Otsego Refugee Resettlement Coalition brings together nonprofit organizations, businesses, educational institutions, faith communities, and individuals to establish a process to resettle refugees in Otsego County.

Otsego County, like much of upstate New York, has been losing population. Businesses cannot find enough people to hire, making it difficult for them to operate at full capacity. Schools have fewer students and thus receive less state assistance. Communities with fewer residents struggle to balance budgets and raise the tax revenue necessary to fund public infrastructure.

The Coalition seeks to bring new people with diverse experiences and fresh ideas to help grow our county. Refugees and immigrants are heavily vetted before they arrive. They are very likely to work hard, start new businesses, and value the opportunities of their new country. In the long run they add value to their new community and increase local tax revenues.

The Coalition focuses on sponsoring refugees. A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee their country because of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. They cannot return home or are afraid to do so. The Coalition works with refugees who have requested refugee status outside the United States. After a thorough vetting process by the FBI, CIA, Department of Defense, and Department of Homeland Security, they are cleared to travel to the United States and resettle.

In June 2023, The Coalition welcomed its first group of refugees. The Wall Street Journal profiled this work as an example of how rural communities can benefit from refugee resettlement. In May 2024, The Coalition welcomed a refugee who is now working full-time. In March 2025, The Coalition welcomed a family of five (two parents and three young children) with Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs). There is a tremendous need to sponsor Afghans who assisted US troops during the war in Afghanistan and now risk persecution by the Taliban.

Refugees are supported financially for at most 90 days during which The Coalition provides housing, assists in accessing SNAP benefits and Medicaid, helps them to find jobs, enroll children in school, apply for New York State IDs or driver's licenses, and ensures that newcomers are able to achieve independence.

The Coalition has:

- created an inventory of housing options with landlords in and near Oneonta who are willing to rent apartments and houses to refugees
- collected donated household items, furniture, and clothing for refugees
- identified employers who are eager to hire refugees
- coordinated with the Department of Social Services in Otsego County to provide public benefits to refugees
- received assurance from the Oneonta City School District that refugee children will be welcomed