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Integrating Syrian Refugees

The role of the Settlement Mentor

A picture is worth a thousand words, or in this case, a thousand actions. The image of little Aylan Kurdi washed up on the beach spurred the Canadian government to open its borders and accept 25,000 Syrian refugees into the country. Bringing over thousands of people, who speak little English, who come from a conservative Muslim nation, with only the clothes on their backs, created its own challenges. Some refugees arrived via private sponsorship programs organized through citizen and community groups, but many arrived as “Government Assisted Refugees” (“GARs”). Under private programs, a refugee is specifically provided for by a private citizen or group. GARs, on the other hand, have their expenses and resettlement needs taken care of by the government. While the government provides a number of resources for the newly arrived refugees, GARs may not get that one on one connection and friendship that a privately sponsored refugee may receive. To assist GARs with the challenges they face integrating into Canadian society, the Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia has a settlement mentor program that matches volunteers from the community with newly arrived refugees.

Refugees who wish to be part of the program are matched with a settlement mentor for a period of six months. The initial meetings

are challenging but exciting as the parties get to know each other, communicating as best they can given many mentors do not speak Arabic. Imagine how daunting it is to come to Canada after living in a Jordanian refugee camp, not understanding the language, and having to figure out how to live in a foreign land. Typically, during their early meetings, a settlement mentor will take the newcomer around the local area to show them where shops and services are, how to use transit and pay bills, and how to navigate the banking and health care systems. After the newcomer has a sense of how to take care of their basic



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needs and has settled in, the settlement mentor will start to expand their outings to include fun days, such as trips to local markets.

Aside from simply orientating Syrian refugees in Canadian ways, the settlement mentor and the newcomer form a friendship that is indispensable in making the newcomer

feel welcome. While newcomers are happy to be in Canada, the transition can be particularly hard. Frustration surrounding the inability to communicate in English is one source of angst. And although newcomers will quickly make friends among local Arab speaking Canadians, they may not have anyone to speak English with. Settlement mentors give the newcomer an opportunity to speak with fluent English speakers to improve their language skills.

Some Canadians grumble that the Syrians will keep to themselves and not integrate. To successfully integrate Syrians into Canadian society, it is imperative that Canadians reach out and welcome them first. Not doing so is like inviting a person to a party where they know no one, and no one speaking or making an effort to make that guest feel wel-

come, yet complaining that that guest isn't friendly. Having a settlement mentor gives the newcomer the opportunity to become familiar with many facets of Canadian society, which will lead to stronger ties to their new homeland. What do settlement mentors get in return? A sense of pride in helping people who have been through horrific events, and the experience of Syrian hospitality... maybe even an amazing home cooked traditional Syrian meal and the strongest, most delicious Arabic coffee this side of Damascus.

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