



“Becoming Welcoming Communities” LCWR August Recess Action Kit

When Jesus was a child his mother and father fled with him across the Egyptian border in search of safety and refuge. They were fleeing violence. They were quite literally running for their lives; seeking only to save their child from harm.

More than 60,000 children without their parents and another 60,000 mothers and their children have crossed our southern border for the same reason. These children and families are seeking protection from danger and refuge from harm. As Pope Francis reminded us in his recent message to the Mexico-Holy See Colloquium on Migration and Development: “This humanitarian emergency requires, as a first urgent measure, these children be welcomed and protected.” Let us seize this opportunity to be communities of compassion and care for children and their families.

In the face of this humanitarian crisis Congress appears to be unable to act. During these past few weeks lawmakers have considered a number of pieces of legislation affecting children and families seeking refuge. The Senate could not muster enough votes to overcome the procedural hurdles necessary to consider supplemental appropriations to fund services for refugees. After fits and starts the House managed to gather enough votes in the eleventh hour to pass a woefully inadequate funding bill aimed primarily at strengthening the border and eliminating legal protections for child refugees. To add insult to injury, the House passed a second bill that denies approximately 500,000 recipients of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) the ability to renew their status and avoid deportation and attempts to stop the President from extending deportation relief to other groups.

From August 1 to September 7, Representatives and Senators will be spending time in their home districts meeting with constituents and holding town hall meetings to gauge the needs and concerns of local folks. Opening the hearts and minds of constituents and Members of Congress to our immigrant neighbors is critical to ensuring positive congressional action in the fall.

There are number of things we can do to create welcoming communities and build support for just and fair immigration processes. None of us have to do everything, but, I believe, each of us is obligated to do something.

- Schedule visits with your Members of Congress or their district staffs.
- Attend a Town Hall meeting or two.
- Write a Letter-to the Editor or an Op Ed piece for your local media outlet.
- Advocate for a local resolution to declare your municipality a “Welcoming Community.”
- Host “Welcome the Stranger” faith activities.

In-District Visits with Members of Congress

Perhaps the most effective way to engage members and their staffs on a particular issue is to make an appointment to visit with them in their district offices. It provides both you and your representative the

time and space to carefully examine this critical issue. In-district visits can provide 30 minutes or more of uninterrupted dialogue about the humanitarian crisis we face.

- **Purpose of Visits:**
 - **To urge your Members of Congress** to support legislation that ensures protection and human rights for children and families seeking refuge, addresses the root causes of forced migration, and reforms the broken immigration system;
 - **To put your faith into action** by showing Members of Congress that their constituents and people of faith care about refugees, migrant children, and their families;
 - **To build relationships** between people of faith and public officials who make decisions that impact your community.

- **Key “Asks” for Your Visits:**
 - **Maintain critical protections for children**, including all legal avenues for immigration relief and crucial safeguards established in the bipartisan Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008;
 - **Ensure adequate funding for the Office of Refugee Resettlement**, the government agency serving unaccompanied children and resettled refugees, as well as other vulnerable populations;
 - **Reject the use of family detention** and expand the use of alternatives to detention, including community-based models, that are more humane, cost-effective, and effective in meeting the goals of immigration detention; and
 - **Address the root causes** that push people from their homes including violence, poverty, and government corruption, especially that which has been exacerbated by U.S. policy.

- **Prepare for the Visit:**
 - **Gather a team:** A team ideally includes faith leaders, members of your congregation, business owners, people whose lives have been directly impacted by the immigration system, people who volunteer or work teaching English or resettling refugees, etc. Aim for 5-10 participants for a visit, though a larger group can be a powerful sign of support.
 - **Learn about your Members of Congress:** Their websites and an internet search will show biographical sketches, religion, political and social memberships, areas of interest, and positions on issues, all of which can inform your approach to the meeting.
 - **Know his/her record on immigration issues:** Find out how your Members of Congress voted on other immigration legislation and if they have official statements about unaccompanied children, family detention, or other key issues. Their websites and an internet search will give you a good picture of their voting record and statements on immigration.
 - **Have a plan:** Before you make your visit, meet with the other participants to assign roles. Who will serve as the facilitator? Who will tell a personal story? Who will address each specific issue point? Who will make the “ask”?
 - **Know the issue:** It is very important to have a good grasp of the issues you wish to discuss. Do your homework. The attached resources may help.
 - **Schedule a meeting:** Call, email, or fax the local offices of your Members of Congress to request a meeting with the member to discuss the humanitarian crisis faced by children and families fleeing violence from Central America. Make sure to tell them how many others would like to attend. If the member is unavailable, ask to meet with a staff

member who works on immigration issues. Be persistent. You may need to follow-up in order to get a meeting scheduled.

- **Make the Visit:**

- The Facilitator will kick off the meeting by introducing your group, explaining the purpose for the meeting, and providing space for the others attending to **briefly** introduce themselves. The facilitator will also jump in if the meeting goes off-track and redirect the conversation. The facilitator might begin by framing your request:
 - *People of faith throughout (town/city/state) care about and children and families arriving at our borders seeking refuge. We are committed to acting out our faith by being good neighbors to these vulnerable populations and building stronger, more welcoming communities.*
 - *Let's start with introductions* (everyone should introduce themselves and their affiliation)
 - *We work very hard at building a welcoming community by* (Invite a participant to tell story of the work your community has done in support of immigrants – anything from foster parenting, adoption, ESL classes, to legal clinics, to advocacy, to other ministries).
 - *We count you, Senator/Representative _____, as our neighbor, too. We commend you for demonstrating the hospitality of our community by* (If possible, find some comments or legislation the member has worked on in support of immigrant communities).
 - *We'd also like to know your thoughts about unaccompanied children and how you think Congress can address the lack of funding for programs caring for children.*
 - *Some of us would like to share our own concerns about the children and families seeking refuge.*

N.B. Providing a personal story is key to every meeting. Someone should be present who has either had direct experience with refugees and migrant children/families, or has worked closely with individuals who have been separated from family members, detained, or deported. Telling these stories will show how peoples' lives are impacted and illustrate why your local community needs immigration reform.

- **Make the Ask:** The ask is the critical part of the visit when you ask

- *"Can we count on you to support legislation that protects funding for refugee services and prioritizes the safety, well-being, and due process of children and families seeking refuge?"* Listen carefully and ask for clarification if what they say is vague.
- *As people of faith, we care about refugees and children arriving alone at our borders. We are deeply concerned about the conditions that forced them from their homes and we are committed to acting out our faith by being good neighbors to these children and their families and building stronger, more welcoming communities.*
- *Can we count on your support in treating children and families humanely, providing robust funding for children, families and refugees, and opposing the detention of migrant children and their families?*

- **Listen Well and Take Notes:** Much of advocacy involves listening, providing opportunities for the member to ask questions, looking for indications of the members' views, and finding opportunities to provide helpful or correct information.
 - Members and staff will appreciate the chance to be heard.
 - Ask questions and engage in conversation. Answer questions honestly. If you don't know the answer, say that you don't know but you will find out. Assign one person in the group to follow up.
- **Wrap Up:** Thank them and invite them to an upcoming prayer vigil, service, or event you are planning. Offer to be a resource to them, and remember to get the staffers' business cards. Consider asking them to take a photo with your group – most members and staffers love the photo op!
- **Debrief Your Meeting:** It's important to make sure you and your group are on the same page immediately after leaving the meeting, while the conversation is fresh in your mind. As a group, review: What did we hear? Did we get what we wanted? What are the next steps? Choose one person to send a thank you and follow up email.
- **Follow up with your Member of Congress:** Send the staff you met an email thanking them for their time, attaching any documents you mentioned, providing answers to questions that came up during the meeting, reaffirming your asks, and inviting them to an upcoming event.

Town Hall Meetings

Many Members of Congress hold town hall meetings during August recess. It is a chance to interact with their constituents. Town hall meetings also offer you a great opportunity to express your concerns by asking well-reasoned questions that also make a point. You can usually find out when these meetings will be held by visiting the webpage of your Member of Congress or calling their district or DC office.

Some tips:

- **Arrive early.** You'll need to arrive at least an hour early get a seat.
- **Sit by the microphone.** If there is one set up, plant yourself near it so you don't end up in the back of the question line.
- **Come with questions written down on index cards.** Some members will try to control the questions by taking them in writing. If you have yours ready to go when you get there, you have a better chance of getting it read.
- **Have a few facts at your fingertips.** In the majority of polls Americans support providing for refugee families and children arriving on our southern border.
 - [A poll by the nonpartisan Public Religion Research Institute](#) found
 - 69% of respondents said the children arriving at the border should be treated as refugees and should be allowed to stay "if authorities determine it is not safe for them to return to their home country."
 - 56% said the families of children coming from Central America were acting to keep the young people safe from violence in their home countries.
 - The office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which interviewed some of the children at the border, found that up to 60% may have valid claims for relief from violence or persecution.
 - 80% (more or less) of these refugees have families or sponsors in this country who are prepared to care for them while they await their immigration hearing.

- **If you come with friends, don't sit with them.** There is strength in numbers, even perceived numbers. If you are literally all over the place, you'll demonstrate that support for immigrants is widespread.
- **Refuse to accept a non-answer for an answer.** Ask your question, and then wait for the response. If you do not get an actual answer to the question, say so with a follow up question.
- **Ask questions that tell the story.** Often, Members of Congress will read the written question out loud. So write down questions that make your point to the entire audience. Instead of, "please explain whether you support the President to act and help families," ask, "do you support the break up of families caused by our broken immigration system?"
- **Be polite, respectful, persistent, and passionate.**

Letters to the Editor and Opinion Editorials

The US response to children and families seeking refuge is a hot topic in the media right now, and the press is interested in diverse opinions on the issue. Letters to the editor or opinion editorials are two of the most powerful ways you can reach members of your community and your members of Congress with key messages about the need to treat those seeking refuge humanely, provide robust funding for vulnerable migrants, oppose detention of migrant children and their families, ensure the due rights process rights of children, address the root causes of forced migration, and accomplish just immigration reform.

Writing Letters to the Editor (LTE) and Opinion Editorials (Op-Eds) to your local newspaper are effective ways to lift up compassionate, pro-immigrant voices. Members of Congress carefully monitor these sections to gauge local opinions.

- Local papers are more likely to publish your piece (including neighborhood, ethnic, and religious papers)
- Keep it short (less than 200 words). State your most important point in the first paragraph.
 - *Paragraph 1* – your main point, why the issue is important to you, your personal story
 - *Paragraph 2* – facts, quotes, numbers, a brief story
 - *Paragraph 3* – restate your point and declare your recommendation
- State the specific action you want the local community and Members of Congress to take.
 - *National:* protect women and children coming to our borders, oppose any attempt to deny children a chance to tell their story to a judge, etc.
 - *State:* Help citizens of our community to demonstrate our compassion by welcoming the children
 - *Local:* Declare our city a compassionate, "Welcoming Community"

Welcoming Communities

Cities, towns, and even states across the country are declaring their willingness to support children and refugee families fleeing violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America. Mayors in Atlanta, San Jose, Lansing, Syracuse, Davenport, Milwaukee, and the Governors of Massachusetts and Maryland have stated their intent to welcome the children. Invite your city, county, or state officials to join the movement and welcome refugee children. Here are some thoughts on how to prepare for such an action.

- Prepare the resolution you want passed (see examples below).
- Identify the members of the council or board who are likely allies and ask to meet with them or use a public comment period to introduce the idea to the entire council.

- Explain how the issue is not only of national concern, but also a local issue, and why a resolution of welcome and support for Central Americans fleeing violence is important to your community.
- Meet with elected official(s) to discuss the resolution you have prepared and ask for their support. Ask whether they would be willing to introduce the resolution. Ask for their advice about the rest of the Council. They may be able to help you identify additional allies.
- Build support among your local community.
 - Collect signatures from local residents, members of your faith-community in support of the resolution, or ask them to send postcards, letters and emails to their elected officials.
 - Encourage your church or organization to make a public statement in support of the children and its commitment to provide resources to help. Share these statements with council members.
 - When the day for the vote arrives, pack the meeting room with your supporters to put pressure on the officials to adopt the resolution. It can be helpful to have "credible" figures, such as faith leaders, lawyers, professors, or other refugees who have been resettled to your area present to speak in support.

- Here are a couple of examples of resolutions:

- From San Francisco

RESOLVED, That the City and County of San Francisco assist in the humanitarian relief effort by dedicating resources towards addressing the short and long term needs of unaccompanied immigrant children entering the San Francisco Bay Area by:

- a) Promoting the need for host families and sponsors who can provide safe and stable housing opportunities for the unaccompanied children and work to move children from the shelters into homes of relatives or host families as soon as possible; and
- b) Identify city resources to ensure that City Departments, in partnership with non-profit organizations, can offer a continuum of culturally competent relief services to meet the medical, mental health, educational, and legal needs of these children and their families; and, be it

FURTHER RESOLVED, That the City and County of San Francisco urges our United States Congressional delegation to ensure the humane treatment of the thousands of minors being detained and to extend the necessary level of protections including humanitarian relief, advocacy, legal support, and expeditious reunification of minors with their families; and, be it

FURTHER RESOLVED, That the San Francisco Board of Supervisors hereby directs the Clerk of the Board to send a copy of this Resolution to the Honorable Dianne Feinstein, United States Senate, the Honorable Barbara Boxer, United States Senate, the Honorable Nancy Pelosi, Minority Leader, U.S. House of Representatives and the Honorable Jackie Speier, U.S. House of Representatives.

- From Columbia, South Carolina City Council

A Resolution to Restate the Founding Principles of Columbia, South Carolina, to Welcome Unaccompanied Immigrant and Refugee Children and to Support Comprehensive Immigration Reform

WHEREAS, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) reports that 350 children detained by immigration authorities were released to sponsors, typically relatives, in the State of South Carolina between January 1, 2014 and July 7, 2014 to be cared for while their immigration case is processed; and

WHEREAS, these 350 refugee children, who had no parent or guardian available to care for them when they were taken into custody, represent less than 1.2% of the 30,340 displaced children released to sponsor families across the nation; and

WHEREAS, displaced refugee children, like those placed in sponsor families in South Carolina, are often the most vulnerable among us having come to the United States fleeing violence, abuse or persecution in their home countries, as victims of human trafficking or simply seeking the opportunity to work hard and build a better life for themselves and their families; and

WHEREAS, the City of Columbia was founded in the spirit echoed in the words of Senator John Lewis Gervais who hoped "the oppressed of every land might find a refuge under the wings of Columbia"; and

WHEREAS, the City of Columbia believes that we have a duty to protect our children and provide for them and that to turn away a child in need, regardless of where he or she was born, is a violation not only of that spirit but of the fundamental principles of community and brotherhood upon which our city's foundations were built; and

WHEREAS, the City of Columbia further recognizes that the current influx of child refugees here and across the nation is only a symptom of a larger problem and that the only way to truly address the growing humanitarian crisis at our nation's southern border is to enact a comprehensive immigration reform plan that secures our borders, grows our economy and gives undocumented youth and their families the chance to earn their citizenship; NOW, THEREFORE,

BE IT RESOLVED by the Mayor and City Council of the City of Columbia, South Carolina on this 5th day of August, 2014 that we welcome every refugee child and unaccompanied immigrant child released to sponsors within our community by the Office of Refugee Resettlement and call on local, state and federal leaders to work together to address the current child refugee crisis by immediately adopting comprehensive immigration reform.

Faith Activities

One of the most profound ways that we can welcome our immigrant brothers and sisters and break open the hearts of our neighbors is through prayer and worship, remembering that we are called from every tribe, tongue, and nation to be to be one in Christ Jesus. Host "Welcome the Stranger" faith activities during this August recess and invite your Members of Congress to join you.

- Participate in days of prayer and fasting.

- Plan vigils at detention centers and refugee/child migrant facilities.
- Encourage your church to make a public statement in support of the children and to commit to providing resources to help.
- Talk to your local bishop or pastor about designating a Sunday in August, “Welcoming Sunday”.
- Pray with the pastoral letter from the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey*.
- “Be” a praying community. Join St. Thomas More Parish Community in, Kalamzoo, MI.

*Loving God,
 For the children at our doorstep, aching with need for shelter, safety, a future,
 we cry out to you.
 For a government system unprepared to respond,
 we cry out to you.
 For politicians struggling to find common ground and lasting solutions,
 we cry out to you.
 For counselors and first-responders, exhausted and horrified by the numbers, the stories,
 the pain,
 we cry out to you.
 For your church, including those in this community, called to reach out, welcome, and
 love,
 we cry out to you.
 May we be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ, who knew so well what it meant to be
 vulnerable.
 May we be motivated by love, and not by fear.
 May our leaders be filled with wisdom and a spirit of compassion.*

*Nothing is impossible for you. Because of this, may we be filled with hope.
 Amen.*

Some Resources

- [Migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America](#) — El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras — has risen steadily as violence has increased. Mary Small of Jesuit Refugee Service/USA and Shaina Aber of the United States Jesuit Conference explain what is driving people to flee for their lives. (YouTube Video)
- [Catholic Legal Immigration Network](#), has published a wonderful resource, [10 Ways to Welcome the Children at Our Border](#).
- US Catholic Conference of Bishops has developed the [Unaccompanied Migrant Children Resource Kit](#).
- [The Justice for Immigrants](#) website offers lots of helpful materials including:
 - A [Parish Kit](#) which contains everything from background material to homily notes and media helps;
 - [Liturgy and prayer](#) suggestions;
 - [Catholic Social Teaching and Migration](#).
- The [Interfaith Immigration Coalition's](#) website also contains a variety of helpful resources including:
 - [Media Room](#) where you can find statements, letters, and webinars;
 - [Prayer Vigils for Immigration Reform Toolkit](#).

- [Welcoming America](#) is supporting the [Growing Number of Communities](#) that are welcoming unaccompanied children.

Credits

Many thanks to the colleagues and friends from whom I borrowed heavily while preparing these materials—all the credit is theirs and the mistakes mine.

- [Alliance for Citizenship](#)
- [Episcopal Church Migration Ministries](#)
- [Church World Service](#)
- [Interfaith Immigration Coalition](#)
- [Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service](#)
- [NETWORK](#) Catholic Social Justice Lobby
- [US Jesuit Conference](#), National Advocacy Office