

Viewpoint: Let's open door to help Syrian refugees in Saskatoon

David McGrane and Haidah Amizadeh, November 20, 2015, *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, A8.

As has been widely reported, the new federal government is aiming to welcome 25,000 additional Syrian refugees to Canada before the end of 2015. The Saskatoon Open Door Society has been asked to be the primary settlement service provider for our city's portion of these refugees, calculated to be 770 newcomers. This means that three per cent of the Syrian refugees destined for Canada will pass through our doors before the New Year.

As an organization, we are excited to be the lead agency in Saskatoon to welcome them. With the help of the community, we are confident that we can get the job done.

This fall, the Open Door Society celebrated our 35th anniversary. In fact, our organization was founded in 1980 to meet the growing needs of Vietnamese refugees who were arriving in Saskatoon. With our experience, we know what it takes to ensure the successful integration of refugees into Saskatoon.

We have developed a plan to house, feed and clothe the Syrians once they arrive, and we are setting up a rapid response team to deal with any unforeseen circumstances. We are working closely with ethnocultural communities and all immigrant settlement organizations to effectively utilize their specific expertise and unique resources. We are reaching out to business organizations, unions, educational institutions and all levels of government to assess the contributions they can make.

We recognize that concerns have been raised about welcoming so many refugees in such a short time. Worries have been expressed about the ineffectiveness of the refugee screening process prior to arrival, as well as the possibility that local settlements services will be overwhelmed once the refugees reach Canada.

Our agency plays no role in screening refugees before they arrive in Saskatoon. That is the highly technical and specialized role of the federal government and the United Nations. We can only note that refugees whom we have settled in the past have never posed any security risk to Saskatoon, and we are confident that this will continue.

In terms of local settlement services being overwhelmed, we admit there's a big

job ahead of us. However, we firmly believe in the generosity and goodwill of the citizens of Saskatoon. We have already received numerous inquiries from the public about what they can do to help us welcome the Syrians. Citizens can aid us with settling them in two ways.

First, you can volunteer. In addition to regular programming such as mentoring and conversation circles, volunteers will be needed in areas such as basic reception (shopping, moving, orientation), language tutoring and community orientation. Cultural training and duty-specific training will be provided. Volunteering with the Saskatoon Open Door Society allows you to meet fascinating people, and there is nothing more rewarding than helping newcomers settle into their new home.

Second, as a charitable organization, we collect monetary and other donations from the general public. Your donations will go directly to providing services to help Syrian refugees. Monetary donations can be made by cheque or credit card at the front desk of our office located at 100-129 Third Avenue North. The Syrians will also need winter clothing and small household goods. The Open Door will be co-ordinating drop-off and delivery of these donations. For more information, about volunteering or making a non-monetary donation, please contact Julie Fleming Juarez at juliefj@sods.sk.ca or 306-653-4464.

When we think of the refugees who will soon arrive, we see opportunity and potential. They create a great opportunity for Saskatoon as they will become productive citizens of our city, as so many refugees before them have done. Once they are fully settled and integrated into our community, they will make significant contributions to Saskatoon. They and their children are the future entrepreneurs, social activists, academics, tradespeople, doctors, and lawyers of our city.

With the help of the citizens of Saskatoon, the Saskatoon Open Door Society is dedicating itself to seizing this opportunity to make our great city even better.

McGrane is a member of the board of directors of the Saskatoon Open Door Society. Amirzadeh is chair of the board.