

DAVID LANDER, PASTOR CASTLETON CHURCH



Karen Longwell / Northumberland News

COBOURG -- Joan Chalovich and Reverend David Lander, of the Syrian Sponsorship Group, offered advice for new groups at the recent Northumberland County Immigration and Diversity Forum.

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Syrian refugee crisis sparks wave of sponsorship groups in Northumberland

Local churches, residents helping refugees find a new home in Canada

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NORTHUMBERLAND -- The attacks in Paris haven't deterred local groups working to bring Syrian refugees to Northumberland.

The refugee crisis in Syria first caught Cobourg resident Gloria Peters Matthies' attention more than a year ago. She was reading an article in her church magazine about sponsoring a refugee family.

"That just leapt off the page," she said. She went to her pastor at The Alliance Church and later learned two congregants from two other churches approached their pastors at the same time.

Before long three more churches were involved and at last count eight churches have banded together in a growing initiative called The Better Together Refugee Sponsorship. Ms. Matthies is co-ordinating the project with Hillary Veley and they have five core teams working to bring five refugee families to Northumberland. They hope to have two families here by the end of the year.

The Nov. 13 terrorist attacks have had some people questioning bringing refugees into Canada but Ms. Matthies said Better Together remains committed.

"We are deeply saddened by the events of last week," she said. "Our compassion grows as we are reminded so graphically of the desperate struggle to escape and survive that so many innocent people live out every day of their lives. We remember that this is the kind of violence that refugees have been living

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with and fleeing from for years.”

The newly formed Northumberland Syrian Lifeline, led by real estate broker Julie Aldis, also remains committed and hasn't seen a change in support for the cause.

"Fundraising is going well," she said.

The attacks in Beirut and Paris have Ms. Aldis feel stronger about helping refugees.

"It makes the cause more important," she said.

Ms. Aldis plans to open her downtown Port Hope heritage home to several Syrian women refugees.

"I am a trusting person," she said. "Really these are women just like you and me."

Aided by a board of directors, the group could be ready by December to accept the first few women. Long-term, Ms. Aldis said she could take up to eight women. Lifeline is targeting widows, single women, sisters, mothers with daughters 18 or older, and close relatives such as aunts and nieces.

The focus is on female refugees because, Ms. Aldis said, they are often overlooked in the global rush to resettle

traditional parent-child families.

"We know that there are roughly one million women refugees between the ages of 18 and 55," Ms. Aldis said.

The group hopes to raise about \$45,000. Currently they are inviting Northumberland residents to buy a membership for a minimum of \$50 to become part of the group.

Knowing first-hand what is involved in bringing Syrian refugees to Northumberland, Joan Chalovich and Reverend David Lander of the Syrian Sponsorship Group, offered advice for the new groups at the recent Northumberland County Immigration and Diversity Forum in Cobourg.

The Syrian Sponsorship Group began out of the two United Churches in Grafton and Castleton in May 2014. The two church congregations, made up of about 60 people, aimed to raise \$20,000 to support a family of five, said Rev. Lander. They circulated pledge sheets and once they had \$6,000, they set up a bank account. An application for a family was submitted in late July, and the Syrian family arrived in mid-August 2014.

Before coming to Canada, the family had experienced the violence of the war, said Ms. Chalovich. They escaped with only what they could carry and walked the last 10 miles to Jordan.

When they arrived in Canada, they were relieved to be safe, she said.

"They came out (of immigration at the airport) with big smiles," said Ms. Chalovich. "They were so happy to be here."

The group found housing in Cobourg

for the family.

In the beginning there were some struggles. The family members' English was limited and the closest class was in Peterborough. Volunteers drove the parents to class everyday and another roster of volunteers picked up the children from school.

Because they had limited access to health care before coming to Canada, health issues cropped up. Both parents had extreme pain in their teeth.

Canadian traditions such as Halloween were foreign to the family.

"Our culture was strange to them," said Ms. Chalovich.

The family decided to move to London in August 2015, where they had more support and a mosque to attend.

At least one local resident has a direct connection to Syria. Cobourg resident Abeer Al-Salihi left Syria long before the violence erupted. She married a man from Iraq and lived in United Arab Emirates. They moved to Cobourg a little over a year ago with their two children. Ms. Al-Salihi said she is happy that Northumberland is helping Syrian refugees and will offer help.

"This is a good chance for families," she said. "They need a safe place to start again."

HOW THIS IMPACTS YOU:

Northumberland County council committed to a \$10,000 grant to Better Together Refugee Sponsorship.

As of Oct. 19, the United Nations Refugee Agency and government of Turkey had registered 4,180,631 Syrian refugees.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has made a commitment to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees by Jan. 1.

STEPS TO SPONSORING A REFUGEE FAMILY:

- Form a core group of five committed people per family sponsored. The group is responsible for overseeing the entire process including the settlement plan, getting volunteers for specific tasks, decision-making, and choosing the refugee family from the profiles.
- Sign an agreement with a Sponsorship Agreement Holder, an organization which is incorporated (a legally created organization) and has signed a sponsorship agreement with the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration. The Sponsorship Agreement Holder can sponsor refugees themselves or work with others in the community to sponsor refugees.
- Develop a settlement plan -- decide who is responsible for what, such as meeting the family at the airport, arranging accommodation and orientation to town.
- Determine how funds will be raised.
- Get profiles from the Sponsorship Agreement Holder and choose a family to sponsor.
- Fill out sponsor forms.
- Connect with the local Citizenship and Immigration office to co-ordinate the details of the government part of the funding.

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