Columns
Migration



Migrants select clothing and blankets at the Migrant Ministry by the Catholic parishes of Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago. (Sue Paweski)



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Editor's note: *Global Sisters Report launches a new series, "Welcoming the Stranger," which takes a closer look at women religious working with immigrants and migrants. The series will feature sisters and organizations networking to better serve those crossing borders, global migration trends and the topic of immigration in the upcoming U.S. presidential election.*

As women, children, and men from Venezuela poured out of buses into unfamiliar streets of Chicago, seeking refuge from the political horrors of their beloved homelands, I heard someone say, "The borders came to us!" And the next remark was, "What can we do?"

The answer to that question was the effort of Ascension Parish that began what eventually became the formation of the Migrant Ministry by the Catholic parishes of Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago. (The Catholic parishes of Oak Park are Ascension and St. Edmund, St. Catherine of Siena-St. Lucy, and St. Giles parishes.)

The Migrant Ministry is providing food, clothing, medical services and weekly showers for our sisters and brothers in dire need. Migrant Ministry is also providing the Oak Park community with the opportunity to live the Gospel values by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and caring for one another. These are not acts of charity, rather this is what justice calls us to do.

The ministry of the Oak Park churches began with Ascension Parish fostering a Venezuelan family in an apartment. Through the efforts of the parishioners and clergy from the Catholic parishes of Oak Park, more housing was made available. At present, five Venezuelan families are receiving assistance. That initiative sparked the flame of compassion as members of parish communities organized and created the Migrant Ministry to what is it now, a well-organized community of care and outreach.



Individuals form a line for clothing and services at the Migrant Ministry by the Catholic parishes of Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago. (Sue Paweski)

The response has been overwhelming and gratifying. Clothing is accepted on Monday mornings and there is such a great response that some clothes are offered to other charitable outlets. Underwear, socks, sweaters, hats, gloves and jackets are provided to the migrants who are experiencing their first Chicago winter. Masked volunteers glance at each other apprehensively when the shivering people gratefully accept the jackets, knowing that we are not yet in the throes of winter.

When the doors open, the people are brought into a room filled with sandwiches, beverages, cookies and various treats. The services include showers; medical staff from Loyola Medical Center; English language classes, staffed by bilingual teachers. The presence of the pastor and parish staff members whiz throughout the former rectory, answering questions, thanking volunteers, lifting containers of clothing and food with encouraging smiles, and a few phrases in Spanish, to our approximately 500 guests per week.

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Other faith communities have answered the call. Volunteers from surrounding suburbs are committing hours to sorting clothing, setting up tables and chairs for breakfast, English classes, and the medical station. Then the cleanup! The church is the drop-off place for the clothing and that needs to be made ready for Mass the next morning. The rooms need to be vacated and cleaned for the next week. All accomplished by volunteers who are *living* the Gospel values.

I am on the parish staff and I can attest to the many calls we receive on a daily basis inquiring about how people can help with the Migrant Ministry. When I am despairing of the violence and cruelty in our world, my spirits are lifted by the outreach to help those who have little to nothing and are thrust into a desperate situation. There are those who decry the assistance the asylum-seekers are given, citing political reasons. I hope they would come to the ministry and witness the families who are served. Jesus gives no provisos for meeting the needs of our sisters and brothers. The borders came to us and we are compelled to answer the call.

This story appears in the **Welcoming the Stranger** feature series. View the full series.