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Venezuelan immigrants Carlos and Lisbeth Villamizar (far right), are pictured with their daughters Isis and Wuilmari, granddaughter Luciana, and Sr. Martha Lopez (top) at the resource fair sponsored by Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York, at St. Teresa's Church in Manhattan's Lower East Side, in July 2024. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)



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From the backdoor of the historic St. Teresa's Church on Manhattan's Lower East Side on a scorching New York summer afternoon, a little girl's laugh mingled with voices of adults playing with her in Spanish.

In the small office plastered with signs, sheets and brochures in more than 10 different languages, Sr. Martha Lopez was leaning over the floor playing with baby Luciana, a 1-year-old Venezuelan immigrant who arrived in the U.S. in mid-March 2024 with her 23-year-old mother, 16-year-old aunt and 44-year-old grandparents.

"I'm 56 years old but in my heart I'm 15," said Lopez, a Vincentian Family sister from Colombia who has been a missionary for the past 15 years in more than 23 countries in South America and West Africa. For more than 18 months, Lopez was the first person thousands of immigrants who arrived in New York City in the recent mass immigration wave from 2022 met when they asked for help at the resource fair sponsored by Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York at St. Teresa's Church.

Aided by a team of multilingual case assistants and volunteers, Lopez manages the reception desk by welcoming new arrivals, sharing resources and handouts with incoming immigrants, making phone calls on their behalf to clarify some information regarding immigration court dates, and more. Lopez also runs spiritual and recreational activities for children and their families. She has made the historic Hispanic church on the Lower East Side a warm, dignified and welcoming environment for newcomers, and a source of pride for the Catholic Charities agency.



The entrance of the resource fair sponsored by Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York at St. Teresa's Church in Manhattan's Lower East Side, July 2024. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

Lisbeth Villamizar, Luciana's grandmother, supervised her granddaughter sitting in a chair by the reception desk next to her husband Carlos, who wore an arm brace due to a massive fracture he suffered while at work in Atlanta. "We left Venezuela because we had no food and work, we didn't know how to survive anymore," Villamizar said. The couple with their two daughters and 1-year-old granddaughter crossed the Darién Gap between Colombia and Panama, traveling a lengthy route in which, she told NCR, they encountered "wild animals, dead bodies of refugees, high rivers, heavy rains and mountains."

Once they crossed the Rio Grande and arrived in El Paso, Texas, the Villamizars were robbed of the little they had. The family, like tens of thousands of other undocumented immigrants, were taken by bus directly to New York City in mid-March, by the decision of Texas Gov. Greg Abbott. After a brief stop at a shelter

hotel, they traveled to Atlanta where they were promised jobs and a safe life by other members of the local Venezuelan community. After Carlos' accident, however, the Villamizars found themselves alone and homeless, so they decided in late June to return to New York.

At their new shelter hotel, another immigrant suggested that Lisbeth visit St. Teresa's Church, where Catholic Charities could help her to get clothes, food and health care for her family. The morning she embarked on the trip to the Lower East Side, leaving her husband, daughters and granddaughter in the shelter, Lisbeth got lost several times. When she entered the reception desk at St. Teresa's however, Sr. Martha Lopez changed the course of her new life in New York forever. "I immediately felt at peace, as I hadn't in a long time. I was at peace," she said.



Sr. Martha Lopez is pictured working at the front desk of the resource fair sponsored by Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese New York, at St. Teresa's Church in Manhattan's Lower East Side, in July 2024. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

Lopez asked Villamizar if she was Catholic. Until that day Villamizar had not found any Masses in Spanish, so Lopez's question heartened her. They went to Mass together, and soon after returned to Catholic Charities' community center, where Villamizar met a case manager who helped her get medical referrals, apply for medical insurances, get subway MetroCards and a nutritional program for her granddaughter.

"I consider the services we offer to migrants like caresses God gives them through us. Maybe because I am a nun, we usually click and become close. I offer confidence and I see they gain hope and peace," Lopez told NCR. "They need to know they're not alone, that we're just one family on the same boat. They want to be heard and motivated. Immigrants have a lot to tell us and to teach us, and we have a lot to respond to them. We offer them shelter, food, clothing, but emotional support is the most needed for them."

In the spring and summer of 2022, when New York experienced a new wave of immigration triggered by Abbott's decision to bus asylum-seekers to the Northeast, more than 2,000 people showed up at the doors of the Catholic Charities offices in Midtown Manhattan. Many of these migrants were directed to the organization's central headquarters, believing it to be their designated shelter address after receiving documentation from Texas immigration offices. This surge of arrivals created a challenging situation for Catholic Charities, which was unprepared to handle such a large number of new arrivals.

Recognizing the strain on Catholic Charities, city administration officials established an intake center to help newly arrived migrants orient themselves and receive assistance from city agencies. From September 2022 to June 2023, Catholic Charities coordinated the intake at this center, playing a crucial role in helping the new arrivals navigate their new environment.



A desk with explanatory sheets and brochures is pictured at the reception center for incoming immigrants at St. Teresa's Church, in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, in July 2024. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

"We have long advocated for a comprehensive immigration policy that has been fair and humane, and so we think that there has been a failure of Congress for decades, both Republican and Democratic presidents, to address the needed reforms to the immigration system," said Msgr. Kevin Sullivan, executive director of Catholic Charities New York. "We think that there will be ongoing crises, until the time that as a nation, we develop a comprehensive way to reform our immigration system."

Throughout the most recent immigration crisis, Catholic Charities continued to fully operate in New York, providing legal orientation, representation and resettlement services to refugees. One key focus has been preparing new immigrants for employment, particularly in construction, by offering training in safety procedures and helping them obtain the necessary certifications. Sullivan told NCR that the federal government needs to "take whatever steps it can" to provide work

authorization for new immigrants, noting that many of them are eager to find jobs and support themselves.

"There are lots of employers that have reached out to us, and they are clamoring for applicants for jobs, sometimes in more remote areas outside of the city. They struggle to get applicants and they are willing to train people, they're willing to put forward resources, but once we explain to them that there's going to be a long process and that people don't necessarily have status yet, that can be daunting for them," said Kelly Agnew-Barajas, co-director for the Immigrant and Refugee Services Division at Catholic Charities. "I think we would need to see that type of policy filled in to actually help employers meet their needs and help immigrants to work as soon as possible."



Legal and material services and handouts are provided in more than 10 different languages at the resource fair sponsored by Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York at St. Teresa's Church in Manhattan's Lower East Side. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

"If you open the door and provide a helping hand, those immigrants will begin to become integrated, will make it and will add to the vibrancy of New York, add to our economy, add to our communities," said Sullivan.

Margaret Martin, another co-director for the Immigrant and Refugee Services Division at Catholic Charities, has dedicated over 13 years to the immigration legal services programs that involve nearly 150 staff members and provide care for unaccompanied children and hotline services.

One of the greatest challenges she said her team of attorneys faces is the overwhelming demand for services due to the significant influx of new arrivals in New York City. Despite scaling up operations with the help of multiple funders, the demand far outpaces their capacity to provide timely assistance.

To manage this, they prioritize cases based on factors like funding requirements and urgent deadlines, such as the one-year deadline for asylum applications. Special attention is also given to children eligible for federal relief through special immigrant juvenile status, with older children prioritized over younger ones due to age-related eligibility constraints.

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Different programs within the division serve various immigrant populations, and while some have shorter waiting lists, others have long delays, extending into several months. A critical aspect of their work is conducting legal screenings to inform individuals of their eligibility for relief and protect them from exploitation by fraudulent practitioners. Martin also highlighted the importance of providing high-quality legal services to ensure that asylum applications are strong and have a better chance of success. Many immigrants, she said, are victims of attorneys who file fake asylum cases.

Commenting on the recent Biden administration provision to secure the Southern border, Martin said that even if they witnessed a decreased number of arrivals in New York, "our waiting list will not disappear, because there are still the 200,000 people who have arrived in the last couple of years, but it will lead to shorter waiting lists for many of our programs."

> 'I am very grateful to this country for receiving this support. I feel blessed to have found this home for me and my whole family.'
> —Lisbeth Villamizar, Venezuelan immigrant assisted by Catholic Charities
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While the majority of arrivals were previously from specific Latin American countries, the division now sees a more diverse group, including more and more people from Haiti, Venezuela, Ecuador and West African countries. This shift has posed new challenges, particularly in providing services to non-Spanish speaking populations, but the team has adapted by using telephonic interpreters and expanding their knowledge of the unique issues facing these communities.

"What I hope is that no matter what happens in November, we all continue to recognize that there are laws and we can help people. We can help people both understand their rights and their laws, but we can also help them the way we helped families and children at Catholic Charities after being defrauded," said Martin. "My hope is that we continue to realize there is a light shining."

"I am very grateful to this country for receiving this support. I feel blessed to have found this home for me and my whole family," said Lisbeth Villamizar, looking at Sr. Martha Lopez at St. Teresa's Church, after weeping as she recalled her painful choice to leave her ailing father at home in Venezuela. "I would like to have a good job, any job that God will put in my path, so that I can provide for my family," she said.