

Immaculate Conception Hosts Talk on Catholic Charities Refugee Aid

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Maria Biancheri of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Newark gives a talk at Immaculate Conception Church on Wednesday night about refugee resettlement efforts.

PHOTO BY ERIN ROLL/STAFF

By *ERIN ROLL*

There are about 16 million people with refugee status worldwide, Maria Biancheri told an audience in Madonna Hall at Immaculate Conception Church on Wednesday evening. “What percentage do you think get through the vetting process?” she asked the audience.

“Five percent?” one audience member asked.

“Lower ... it’s really less than 1 percent,” Biancheri said.

About 160,000 get through the vetting process, on average, and about half that number come to the United States, she said.

The church was hosting the talk, given by Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Newark, to show people how they can get involved with refugee resettlement efforts.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is one of 10 organizations in the United States authorized by the federal government to resettle refugees, and Biancheri noted that the conference only

just received certification from the State Department to do so. Other participating agencies include Church World Service, Episcopal Migration Ministries and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

Catholic Charities is involved with greeting the refugee families upon their arrival in the United States, setting them up in housing, conducting health screenings, and working with the families on job searches, language skills, cultural orientation and enrolling their children in school.

“Really, we have to start getting them ready for independence from day one,” Biancheri said.

During her discussion of the background on the current refugee situation, Biancheri explained that the Obama administration had given permission, prior to 2016, to raise the number of refugees that would be allowed into the United States. Catholic Charities had just sent some team members to undergo training. Then the fiscal year changed over. “And then November happened, and then January happened,”

Biancheri said, to some laughter from the audience.

She said Catholic Charities was proceeding with caution, now that the two “travel ban” executive orders have been overruled in federal courts. “Maybe we’ll be getting a family or two, but we don’t have anybody just yet,” she said. So the focus was on building a network of volunteers to help.

Last year, 601 refugees were resettled in New Jersey. A number of organizations in the Montclair area, both houses of worship and secular groups, have been working with the 10 receiving agencies to help resettle refugees in the area. Some local groups in Montclair, Maplewood and other towns in Essex County have been holding Syria Supper Clubs, where refugee families and community members get together for dinner and conversation. Biancheri said that Muslims make up 46 percent of refugees admitted to the United States, followed by Christians at 44 percent.

One of Biancheri’s PowerPoint slides gave statistics from the U.N. Refugee Agency (UNHCR) on the numbers of forcibly displaced people worldwide and how many of them are refugees.

Current figures on the UNHCR’s website show that there are 65.3 million forcibly displaced people, of which 21.3 million are refugees.

As an example of refugee camps, she mentioned the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, where the average stay is nine years. “Some people have been there for 18 years,” she said.

Biancheri noted that there is a pervasive fear that some of the refugees may be terrorists, when in reality refugees are victims of terror. “These people are fleeing terrorists who have, really, destroyed their home. So they are getting away from terrorism.” Another myth is that refugees want to be resettled. The reality is that most of them want to return to their home countries, Biancheri said.

About 40 people attended the talk. By the end of the evening, some had put their names on the two sign-up sheets at the back of the room. “We’re kind of just getting our feet wet,” Biancheri said of Catholic Charities’ getting involved again in refugee work, but it was something that the group was very passionate about. “And thankfully we have Cardinal [Bernard] Tobin’s support, and a lot of the community’s support, so thank you.”

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