



Ukraine Refugee GRANT PROGRAM

Ukraine refugee support is a way for LCMS congregations and Recognized Service Organizations (RSO) to show Christ's love and mercy to people in need. One-quarter of Ukraine's 44 million citizens have been displaced by the war. Nearly six million were forced to flee to other countries, leaving their homes, families, friends, communities and jobs. Several thousand have applied for temporary humanitarian parole status in the U.S., which allows them to live and work here for up to two years. Later, they may have an opportunity to apply for longer-term status.

LCMS congregations in Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska and North Carolina, and RSO Orphan Grain Train, currently are supporting Ukrainian refugees that have come to the U.S. Congregations and RSOs in California, Florida, Massachusetts, Nebraska, New York, South Dakota, Texas and Wisconsin are working on sponsorship.

The actual refugee sponsors, who must be approved by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) must be individuals: congregation members, RSO staff and/or board members.

What are some key facts about Ukrainians?

- The population of Ukraine is 78% ethnic Ukrainian, 17% ethnic Russian, 5% other. Ukrainian, the official language, is spoken by 68% of the population. Russian is spoken by 30% (mainly in northeast and eastern Ukraine and Crimea). *Source: CIA World Factbook*
- Ukrainians are overwhelmingly Christian (87%): 67% Eastern Orthodox, 10% Catholic, 10% other Christian (including Lutheran). 1% are Muslim and 0.4% Jewish.

- 69% of people live in urban areas, and the literacy rate is 99.8%. Students are required to have at least one foreign language (English, German, French, Spanish). Before the war, Ukraine had 5,000 tech companies and nearly 300,000 tech workers, many employed by American companies. Favorite sports: Soccer, basketball, boxing and ice hockey. Read more: theverge.com/c/23546117/ukraine-tech-workers-russia-war.
- Economy: Major wheat producer, industrial and energy exporter. Resources: iron ore, coal, natural gas, oil, salt, timber and agriculture products (like maize, wheat, potatoes, sunflower seeds, sugar, beets, milk, barley, soybeans, rapeseed and tomatoes). Major industries: metals, machinery and transport equipment, chemicals and food processing.

What have been the experiences of congregations and RSOs supporting refugees?

The following are quotes from congregations and RSOs involved in Ukrainian refugee support, in their own words:

Christ Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kan.:

"Our congregation has offered assistance (through a local nonprofit) for two Ukrainian families. One family arrived in Topeka — first the pregnant mother and her two-year-old daughter, and then the father was able to join them a few weeks later. She gave birth to a healthy baby boy in May. Their apartment was not immediately available when they arrived, so one of our members generously opened their home to this Ukrainian family.

We helped collect furniture and purchased many household items for their apartment and coordinated delivery of those goods. What better way to put our faith

in action — we are literally showing love and care for our neighbors. We are uniquely blessed that someone in our congregation speaks fluent Russian and can help if there is a language barrier.”

Grace Lutheran Church, Orphan Grain Train (OGT), and Lutheran High School Northeast, Norfolk, Neb. (OGT has helped more than 20 refugee families who have come to Norfolk since spring 2022, working with Grace and Lutheran High):

“The Lutheran churches in Norfolk all work together. We do joint gatherings, support our LCMS schools, and give to OGT. Our first wave was five Ukrainian families who came together in late summer 2022, and OGT has brought several more. Congregation members are sponsors, but OGT covers all expenses (airfare, rent, utilities, gas for cars, bus tickets, gift cards, etc.). Kelly (our pastor’s wife) has done all the paperwork, which requires about three hours per refugee.

OGT purchased a 12-bedroom house for refugees to use until they transition to longer-term housing (finding apartments has been a challenge). Some of the families want to stay in the U.S., others want to go back to Ukraine after the war. Some refugees don’t speak much English — especially the Russian-speaking ones. Refugees from eastern Ukraine speak Russian, while those from central and western Ukraine generally speak Ukrainian (they also know Russian). Due to the political history, the eastern and western Ukrainians may not get along. We had to find alternate living arrangements for one family due to conflicts with others.

The refugees are very motivated to get jobs, and there haven’t been many problems finding jobs, especially with the utility company, hotel housekeeping or kitchen, maintenance, etc. Even if they have “good” English, customer-facing jobs can be difficult to obtain. But the work permits and Medicaid have been a huge benefit (one woman was diagnosed with uterine cancer after arriving here). The SNAP benefit (food stamps) is an easy application process.

Local people have donated cars to OGT for refugees. Initially they couldn’t get a Nebraska driver’s license (that has since changed), but Norfolk (population 25,000) has a bus transit system. Childcare has been a challenge. Older kids are in private or public schools. One of the boys plays the flute, so we got him set up with flute lessons.

We have four Ukrainian students at Lutheran High (tuition donated). Ukrainian students at both Lutheran High and Christ Lutheran School are taking theology classes and participating in weekly chapel. They and their families also are encouraged to regularly attend worship services at local LCMS congregations.

Blessings for our congregations: it’s nice to see the refugees fit in, and they appreciate our Bible studies. The high schoolers come to youth group. The refugees share their

Ukrainian food with us, teach us their language and culture, and tell us their stories.”

St. John Lutheran Church, Hubbard, Iowa:

“Our number one surprise was that we were told the USCIS approval process would take 6–8 weeks, then 10 days later Alex, Zhenya and little Christina were here — we weren’t ready! They stayed with congregation members for a few weeks until the apartment was ready.

They left Ukraine, lived in Prague for a short time, flew to St. Louis, and arrived with what was in their suitcases.

Our members were very generous in providing clothing, gift cards, furniture, kitchen supplies, bags of groceries, etc., plus many members donated cash to help take care of expenses. They brought their own cell phones, which worked here. They qualified for Medicaid and SNAP benefits until Alex secured a good job in January, which provided insurance.

Initially, the church rented an apartment for them and paid utilities (\$580/month total). Alex bought his own renter’s insurance, and took over rent and utilities on April 1, though the lease is still in the church’s name. His Ukraine driver’s license was good for six months in Iowa. A car was donated, so he obtained his Iowa license and got the title in his name and bought insurance. St. John is now working to sponsor Zhenya’s mother.

“The refugees share their Ukrainian food with us, teach us their language and culture, and tell us their stories.”

— Grace Lutheran Church, Norfolk, Neb.

Hope Lutheran Church, Wake Forest, N.C.:

“The area surrounding Hope Lutheran has the third largest number of Ukrainian refugees in North Carolina, and the number is growing every day. There is a huge need for positive, stable, vetted families to host and feel supported in doing so. One family in the congregation is sponsoring/hosting a Ukrainian refugee (age 33), and others are considering doing so.

We help with everyday needs such as housing, food, employment, transportation and education. Hope members provided funds for a preschool sponsorship and rent assistance for an additional Ukrainian family, plus thrift store gift cards for clothing. Members provided household items such as mattresses and dishes for multiple individuals. Community members have provided frequent flyer miles for refugees who received travel authorization from USCIS.

We have learned that it takes at least five volunteers coming alongside each refugee or refugee family to help

ensure success in a new area, and that refugees need ownership of the resettlement process and decision-making authority to succeed at independence.

We have seen that quick donations are not the best answer for refugees, but that relationship-building, needs assessments, lots of communication touches and sometimes crisis responses are effective. Ukrainians fleeing to our area need solid host sponsors who are willing to involve lots of other people in the process of giving refugees a safe place to land, space to process trauma and resources for a kick-start to independence in a totally foreign place.

Our congregation has regular Ukrainian attendees and visitors already, who have then in turn invited others. We have provided Bibles, catechisms, prayer and devotional books, and worship and prayer support to multiple Ukrainian guests. We were told by one Ukrainian woman whose family received support here that she has in turn been able to share about God with other people in her life, who have since returned to regular prayer and worship after seeing how she prayed for help and God provided. She believes God sent the people of Hope to walk alongside her family, and those acts of mercy provide a powerful witness to connect people with the Word here. One of her children is in Hope's preschool hearing about Jesus on a daily basis, and all of her children partake in devotions and activities alongside a diverse group of children in our day camp when regular school is not in session."

immigrant and has been very involved in helping other Ukrainian refugees in the community.

COSTS AND LOGISTICS OF REFUGEE SPONSORSHIP

Costs vary with location, type of housing arrangements used, etc. The LCMS Ukraine Refugee Grant Program (lcms.org/serve/grants/ukraine-refugee-grant-program) provides a list of resources that help estimate expenses, or that may be available to help offset sponsorship costs, including airfare, food, etc. Also, USCIS provides budget recommendations.

- Immediate needs include toiletries, feminine care products, food staples (a stocked pantry), pots and pans, thrift store gift cards, cell phones, public transit passes and appropriate seasonal clothing. USCIS provides checklists of suggested supplies to collect prior to refugee arrival.
- Most Ukrainians have cell phones, but depending on the make/model, they may or may not switch to a local carrier. If purchased online, the phones are more likely to be compatible with U.S. carriers. Used (refurbished) phones can be purchased on Amazon, through Best Buy, backmarket.com, etc.
- Orphan Grain Train spends about \$1,000/month on rent and utilities, and \$500–\$700/month on food items for each refugee family, depending on the family size. Early on, the arriving refugee families had money and access to their bank accounts. Families arriving more recently have waited and waited for travel authorization, moved several times since leaving Ukraine (Romania, Poland, Germany), using up much of their savings, so they don't have many resources. One refugee needed a root canal, and Medicaid wouldn't cover it, so the sponsor and supporters did.
- St. John Lutheran Church in Hubbard, Iowa, has a detailed accounting of cash and in-kind donations provided by the congregation to support their refugee family. The total expended (for 2 adults and 1 child) in the first four months was just under \$10,000, including airfare from Europe, car rental, rent, utilities, medical and a monthly stipend (spending money) of \$300/month. The refugee husband obtained his work permit and Social Security number within six weeks of arrival and found a good job. They were largely financially self-sufficient after four months.

"They left Ukraine, lived in Prague for a short time, flew to St. Louis, and arrived with what was in their suitcases."

— St. John Lutheran Church, Hubbard, Iowa

What are some specific needs, solutions and costs associated with sponsorship?

FINDING A SPONSOR

USCIS requires that the American sponsor of the refugee is an individual, not an organization. But the sponsor can list supporting/partner organizations (like their congregation) on the application. See www.Welcome.US for more details.

- **St. John Lutheran Church, Hubbard, Iowa** — The sponsor of the refugee family is the pastor, who knew the refugee (Alex, an assistant to the bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ukraine) from previous travel to Ukraine.
- **Orphan Grain Train, Norfolk, Neb.** — This RSO has helped bring more than 20 refugee families (more than 40 people) to Norfolk, Neb. The sponsors are board members and staff of OGT and local LCMS congregation members.
- **Our Savior Lutheran Church, Fenton, Mo.** — The sponsor of the refugee family is the head elder.
- **Hope Lutheran Church, Wake Forest, N.C.** — Sponsors are members of the congregation who have traveled extensively, studied abroad, led mission trips and connected with refugee families in the community.
- **Christ Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kan.** — The sponsor is a congregation member who is married to a Russian

LCMS grant applicant: "We estimate approximately \$4,000 to help offset preschool and day camp expenses for Ukrainian families, so the parents can seek work, and work while their children are safe and attended. We estimate \$6,000 for deposit and rent assistance for Ukrainian refugee families transitioning from sponsor homes to independent housing, as there are landlords in our area willing to

work with refugees when more of the lease is paid up-front. We help with cell phone/utility bills — refugees need a stable number for emergencies, job seeking, transportation and social connectivity.”

LEGAL AND LIABILITY CONCERNS

USCIS conducts screening and background checks on both Ukrainian refugees and their U.S. sponsors, including criminal and credit background. See the contact list at the end of this document, which includes former LCMS missionaries to Ukraine and a US Army Colonel (Ret.) who was the American Army Attaché to Ukraine, who are willing to assist with translation and interviewing of refugees who have no personal connections to the potential sponsors.

In the event a sponsor must move or withdraw from their commitment due to work relocation, health or other personal issues, refugee sponsorship can be transferred to another person.

Legal, liability and tax issues for sponsorship are questions best directed to the individual's/church's insurance carrier, attorney and/or CPA, since laws vary from state to state. However, according to Brotherhood Mutual Legal Assist, assisting refugees is similar to other ministries of a church, so liability shouldn't be an issue (though best to check with the church's insurance carrier).

- **Taxes:** Cash donations provided to a needy individual are considered gifts and are not taxable income as long as the person meets the definition of “needy” under IRS rules. When using LCMS grant funds, it is best for the church to pay service providers directly (e.g., landlord for rent, utility company for power, school for tuition, etc.), and to avoid passing grant funds through congregation members who then support the refugee.
- **Car insurance:** Ukrainians who have an international driver's license can rent vehicles and purchase rental insurance. In some cases, cars were donated or purchased by Orphan Grain Train for refugee families. The title was transferred to them, and they pay for the title and insurance themselves. Loaning a car to a refugee isn't recommended, since they wouldn't be covered by liability insurance unless added to the policy.

LANGUAGE BARRIER

Google Translate and similar tools work well.

Several LCMS members on the contact list at the end of this document are available to help with translation if necessary. Some congregations have identified members or local community residents who speak Ukrainian.

HOUSING SOLUTION EXAMPLES

- Our Savior Lutheran Church in Fenton, Mo., is using their vacant parsonage to house a refugee family (a woman and her two children, ages eight and 12). They received a \$10,000 LCMS grant to help pay for airfare (some flier miles donated), utilities, transportation, basic needs, renter's insurance, cell phones, school supplies and partial Lutheran school tuition for the children.

- Orphan Grain Train works with a local business owner who provides initial housing using repurposed oil field outpost buildings.
- A group of business, nonprofit and church leaders in South Dakota called Freedom's Haven have identified host families, second/vacation homeowners, people with guest houses/casitas and a local monastery to provide housing for refugees.
- The AirBnB Foundation (Airbnb.org) subsidizes AirBnB owners willing to rent to refugees.

EMPLOYMENT

Securing jobs for refugees hasn't been a huge problem — business owners are open to hiring Ukrainian refugees unless their English proficiency is a safety issue.

Many Ukrainians speak English well and have technical skills.

The Freedom's Haven group in South Dakota is working with manufacturers who need employees. Their goal is to find sponsors for 10,000 Ukrainian refugees (South Dakota has a workforce shortage of 27,000+ employees due to a booming economy, so good jobs are available).

Who can we call for more information and/or assistance?

The following congregation and RSO representatives have agreed to have their contact information listed for others who would like to ask questions directly of them:

- **Rev. Chris Asbury**, Grace Lutheran Church, Norfolk, Neb.: Through the efforts of Orphan Grain Train and congregation members, there are now more than 40 Ukrainian refugees in Norfolk. Rev. Asbury focuses on ongoing ministry, teaching, and care for the families while his wife assists with logistics (see below).
revchristopherasbury@yahoo.com
402-302-4232
- **Mrs. Kelly Asbury**, wife of Rev. Chris Asbury: Kelly has volunteered to assist Orphan Grain Train and refugee sponsors to process all necessary paperwork for the Ukrainian refugees, both to enter the U.S. and to live in Norfolk. This includes applications for work authorization, Social Security numbers and Medicaid after arrival, school enrollment, driver's licenses, SNAP benefits, etc.
402-371-3521
- **Col. Lee Gabel**, US Army (Ret.), former Army Attaché to the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv, Watertown, S.D.: Col. Gabel, now a county commissioner, is involved in the Freedom's Haven

“We were told by one Ukrainian woman whose family received support here that she has in turn been able to share about God with other people in her life.”

— Hope Lutheran Church,
Wake Forest, N.C.

for Ukrainian Refugees effort in South Dakota. He speaks fluent Ukrainian, and is willing to help with screening, interviewing, translation, etc.

dlee.gabel@gmail.com
605-880-1278

- **Mrs. Kamryn Green**, Director of Special Projects, Orphan Grain Train, Norfolk, Neb.: OGT has sponsored more than 20 refugee families who have come to Norfolk. Mrs. Green has coordinated travel logistics, housing and everyday needs in collaboration with local LCMS congregations and other community partners.
kgreen@ogt.org
907-799-6717
- **Rev. Dan Johnson**, former missionary in Eurasia (Siberia, Balkans, Ukraine, Liberia). St. John's Lutheran Church, Hubbard, Iowa, which supports a Ukrainian refugee family.
Danielsjohnson356@gmail.com
641-328-4605.
- **Deaconess Jane Obersat**, speaks Russian and German, former LCMS missionary in Russia, teaches ESL, willing to help via Zoom. Faith Lutheran High School of Central Texas.
obersatj@flhstx.org
979-716-7717
- **Rev. Matt Rueger**, St. John Lutheran Church, Hubbard, Iowa: Pastor Rueger met Alex, assistant to the Ukrainian Lutheran Bishop in Odessa, while teaching there. He is the sponsor of Alex and his wife and young daughter.
mrueger@netins.net
641-373-8727
- **Mrs. Hilary Tew**, Operations Manager and Ukraine Project Contact, Hope Lutheran Church, Wake Forest, N.C.: Hilary helps coordinate Hope's assistance to refugees, and along with her husband is a refugee sponsor herself.
htew@hopelutheranwf.org
919-283-6003
- **Dennis Winter**, congregation president of St. John Lutheran Church, Hubbard, Iowa: Dennis has kept a detailed account of cash and in kind donations for the congregation's support of their refugee family.
dntwinter@netins.net
515-689-3462

General information about the Ukrainian refugee situation

- LCMS Communications video of Ukrainian refugee family in Hubbard, Iowa: engage.lcms.org/refugees-video-summer-2023/
- KFUEO interview with Pastor Mark Sell, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Fenton, Mo., and Deaconess Lorraine Roach, LCMS Ukraine Grant Project Consultant: kfuo.org/2023/09/07/coffee-hour-090723-ukraine-refugee-grant-program-for-lcms-congregations/
- Estimated number of refugees from Ukraine recorded in Europe and Asia since February 2022 as of September 12, 2023: statista.com/statistics/1312584/ukrainian-refugees-by-country/
- Monthly intake of refugees from Ukraine to the United States through August 2023: statista.com/statistics/1310881/refugees-ukraine-united-states-2022/
- "What's Happening in Ukraine" information and video, USA for UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency): unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/
- Education on Hold: Almost Half of School-Age Children from Ukraine are Missing Out on Formal Education: unrefugees.org/news/education-on-hold-almost-half-of-school-aged-refugee-children-from-ukraine-missing-out-on-formal-education/
- Ukrainian Refugee Family Finds Safety in the United States After Fleeing War (article and video): unrefugees.org/news/ukrainian-refugee-family-finds-safety-in-the-united-states-after-fleeing-war/