

Kathy Flanagan

For nearly two years, I have been a mentor to one of the immigrant families supported by the Catholic Parishes of Oak Park, Illinois (CPOP). Last November, I gave a father and his adult son an occasional meal and a ride to the shelter at the O'Hare Airport, where they were staying with nearly 100 other people in the lower-level passageways between terminals.

When their wives and toddlers arrived, CPOP offered them rental support, help with grocery purchases, and assistance in navigating essential services like setting up utilities, locating food pantries, obtaining necessary health care, and signing up for nutrition counseling for the babies' mothers.

All these processes required a great deal of patience at a time when social services in the Chicago area were overwhelmed by an influx of 50,000 migrants who were bused or flown to Chicago and abandoned by the governor of Texas. I learned a lot about the intricacies and indignities of the many bureaucratic rules and regulations, hurdles and phone trees that our less privileged citizens deal with on a regular basis. But more importantly, I experienced firsthand, on behalf of my migrant family, the dedicated service of dozens of overworked social service staff and health care providers. We were always treated with respect despite the complexities of the migrants' needs in the absence of essential documents, such as passports, driver's licenses, social security numbers, or health insurance cards.

I was also inspired by the myriad volunteers from all faiths who arose to serve the migrant community, at great sacrifice of their time and personal resources. The Catholic Church, especially Catholic Charities, stood with the migrants, not only providing food, shelter, and clothing, but also publicly urging respect, compassion, resources, and justice for these new arrivals to our country.

I also gained deep respect for and pride in the safety net of services that cities like those in the greater Chicago area, the State of Illinois, and the federal government provide to those who are in dire need or temporarily down on their luck. Over this intense period of integrating migrants in our area, no one died of hunger, died of exposure to the cold or heat, or was refused necessary medical treatment.

I gained a much greater understanding of the importance of community and the real-life implications of a "preferential option for the poor." I also formed deep and enduring friendships with the family that I mentored, which have enabled me to understand the motivations for their difficult journey of migration and their hopes for a better future for their children. I pray that these hopes will not be dashed. Nonetheless, they have experienced a tremendous outpouring of generosity and goodwill from our citizens. This

awakening cannot be taken from them. They will carry this experience of humanity, generosity, and goodwill with them into their future, regardless of the outcome of their search for asylum.