

TBT and JCRC send warmth to Phoenix

By Mara Koven-Gelman, Director

It started with a simple email from JCRC Phoenix executive director Paul Rockower, "Help on the Asylum front--need winter clothing ASAP." Paul sent this urgent request to several cold climate JCRCs. He explained The International Rescue Committee (IRC) Phoenix Welcome Center helps up to 250 people seeking asylum a day. The asylees, mostly fleeing gang violence and political strife from South and Central America and Cuba, are processed and immediately sent to sponsors in cold climates. Phoenix aid organizations quickly ran out of warm clothing and coats.

JCRC Buffalo reached out to Temple Beth Tzedek (TBT) member and co-chair of the Keshet Inclusion Committee Sharla Bleichfeld who in turn organized a coat drive. Together with Rabbi Adam Rosenbaum, Janet Gunner, Marian Lustig, Bruce Bleichfeld, Kim Jones and Pat Farrell, the synagogue gathered 50 coats, mittens, and hats for people of all ages. Ariel Kostiner, of HQ Shipping, packed and shipped the coats (for a generous discounted rate.) Additional donated funds bought 11 new coats purchased from Lands' End. A large quantity of warm clothing was also given to JFS to local Afghan asylees who are settling in the Buffalo community.

"Most importantly, we are grateful for this opportunity to coordinate with the IRC Welcome Center along with volunteers in the Jewish community in Phoenix as well as Jewish Family Services of Buffalo to put our Jewish values into action," said Sharla.

The Asylee Journey from the South

Anna Keating, an Interfaith Asylum Refugee Volunteer working with The Welcome Center acted as the contact for TBT and JCRC, explained, "in early November we started thinking about the need for warm clothing for those traveling to colder climates. We found quickly that getting winter coats in Phoenix was difficult.

Asylees come from countries with significant gang violence or political strife. They typically cross the border and tell a border patrol agent that they wish to claim asylum. The vast majority are returned to Mexico without being allowed to claim asylum. If they pass an initial interview and are from certain countries, they may be allowed entry to the interior to join their sponsors who are located all over the country. Normally people stay at The Welcome Center less than 24 hours before they travel to their sponsors. They are offered a place to sleep and meals. Often people arrive with only the clothes they are wearing.

Anna Keating was so grateful for the coats, "the people who travel to their sponsors will face many challenges, but thanks to your generosity, being cold will not be one of them."

The coats arrived March 1st. "I wanted to offer my heartfelt thanks to all of you who worked to make this delivery of winter coats possible. The attached pictures show them arriving at the Welcome Center this morning. The volunteers, who were unloading, were going to take them directly to our "Ropa" Room (clothing shop) where asylum seekers could receive them. We reserve these heavy winter coats for those families traveling to New England and the upper Midwest.

We had over 250 people spend the night last night and they will travel today. I expect that by this time on Thursday most of these coats will be keeping those who have traveled warm, Anna added.”

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