

Closing the Social Distance from Afar

by Mike Sullivan, Agency Director

How does one close a social distance from afar? And how does our community safely connect to the refugees whom we welcome? And how do we stay connected with our volunteers, who we miss so much? Refugees and volunteers feel a similar void. Isolation. Let me share some background to the dilemma and what The Welcome to America Project is doing to continue our welcomes.

Newly settled refugees feel liberated, yet isolated. They do not yet have history with the relationships that connect us to community. Their friends, schools, employers and places of worship, all new to them, are suddenly absent from their day-to-day lives. The comforting physical presence of the resettlement agencies is less physically accessible. And once friendly faces now wear masks over their smiles. For many, this uncertainty conjures up feelings they experienced in the early days in refugee camps, feeling sheltered and safe from harm but confused as to what the future holds.

Volunteers also feel a tremendous void. Our body clocks tell us that today is a volunteer day, and we should be doing something to welcome refugees. Warehouse and weekend volunteers miss the camaraderie and sense of purpose their service provides. Like refugees, volunteers are confused about what the future holds and how long this uncertainty will continue.

Which brings us back to our original questions about how to help refugees feel welcome and how to keep volunteers feeling connected. Let me start with a simple fact: Refugees are counting on us for their well-being as they navigate their paths to self-sufficiency in unprecedented times. As confused and lonely as you might feel, imagine the added impact of limited native language skills and financial insecurity. Yes, volunteers and donors, we are in a position to help. And helping refugees just might help you too, fostering a clear purpose in an unclear era.

WTAP is focused on the areas of most immediate impact:

- Computers for job searching, job applications, English language learning, COVID education and connection to community.
- Bikes for work commute, simple errands and to keep refugees off of potentially crowded buses.
- Kits, especially food, cleaning and hygiene kits so that refugees, unexpectedly unemployed, do not have to choose between soup and hand soap or flour and 409.

Maybe you, your school, your club, your employer or your place of worship wants to unite around a drive to gather such items? For refugees, COVID is a test of their resilience, an aspect of their character they've been proving for years. For volunteers, it's also a defining moment. Who are we?

[Click here](#) to find the items most urgently needed in kit contents. [Click here](#) to learn about bikes and computers, including how to donate.

We are all a part of the welcomes. What role will you play? And more importantly, what is your COVID-19 community service story?