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Hinsdale South human rights club collects donations for asylum seekers

By Zareen Syed
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Students at Hinsdale South High School recently held a supply drive for asylum-seekers who arrived in the Chicago area in recent weeks, collecting a number of most-needed items like suitcases, duffel bags, shoes and clothing.

The school's Amnesty International/Human Rights Club plans to have supply drives throughout the school year to help the current crisis, said faculty sponsor, Matthew Kahler.

"The idea [of the club] is to look at things going on in the world and see where we can help," Kahler said.

As of Sept. 27, nearly 1,500 migrants had arrived in Chicago from Texas as part of Gov. Greg Abbott's plan to send asylum-seekers to sanctuary cities that also include Washington, D.C., and New York City. The move highlights the Republican governor's opposition to President Joe Biden's policies on immigration.

Several migrants from Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela have spoken to the Tribune about their experience boarding buses hoping to find shelter and assistance. Still, they are often given no specific guidance upon arriving at Union Station.

A group of 64 migrants taken to Burr Ridge on Sept. 7 were part of the first group of asylum-seekers who arrived in Chicago on Aug. 31.

In a few instances, dozens of families and children were taken to hotels in Burr Ridge and Elk Grove Village soon after buses brought them to Union Station.

Kahler said his students were invested as soon they learned that migrant families were temporarily stationed at Hampton Inn & Suites not far from Hinsdale South's campus.

"They were like, hey did you hear about these people that were dropped in Burr Ridge? What can we do to help?' " Kahler said.

After agreeing on the idea of a supply drive, the students chose to donate items collected to Chicago City Council Latino Caucus.

The organization has several drop-off locations around Chicago and recently put out a social media call for supplies to support asylum-seekers.

Necessary items for adults include large suitcases, new clothes and undergarments, shoes, electronics; children's clothing, socks, strollers, toys, sippy cups and more.

Between Sept. 26-28, students in Amnesty International Club rounded up three suitcases, four duffel bags, 41 toys, 17 reusable water bottles, 31 pairs of shoes, 52 pieces of kids' clothes, art supplies and packs of clothes for adults.

Kahler said his students got creative when sourcing for most needed items, like going to the sketchers store and diving through the clearance shoe section to purchase new footwear.

"We definitely have a student body here at South that is interested in helping out and leaders that are doing amazing work in trying to bring equity and opportunity to make sure people have a fair chance," he said

Last year the club collected feminine hygiene products for Chicago-based Her Drive to donate to women's shelters and organizations lacking in tampons and pads. They also supported families in war-torn Ukraine by collecting essentials to send overseas.

Any surplus items they collect for any effort are handed over to various local organizations, Kahler said.

While the 64 Venezuelan migrants brought to Burr Ridge were later moved to Cook County, according to a statement from Burr Ridge Mayor Gary Grasso, the "close-to-home" situation made folks in the affluent community more aware, Hinsdale South senior Jokoba Slajus said.

"What's happening is really sad and people here just don't know about it," Slajus said. "I come from an immigrant family and if that happened to my parents or family, we wouldn't know what to do."

Slajus, who joined Amnesty International Club last year, was mostly tasked with collecting money for the drive during lunch periods.

"It's high school so it's a pretty hard job to try and get people to donate their money. So I had to find ways to encourage it ... I heckled people," he laughed.

Pooling together donations from students and staff pushed the monetary total to $120 in two days.

Slajus said supply drives in schools are effective because students and adults can visualize how their efforts are making a difference.

"I think it's important in a school setting to have these experiences," he added. "Young people have power in schools and it prepares them for when they're out in the world faced with similar situations."

Kahler said that even though the collection is wrapped up, he will still take and store items people bring in or redirect them to the folks at Chicago City Council Latino Caucus who continue to collect a wide variety of things.

The club plans on doing another wave of collections for asylum-seekers later in the semester.



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