

|Ames Interfaith Refugee Alliance (AIRA) Concept Document
Ames UCC (Iowa Conference) Fall 2016

Not since the upheaval of World War II have there been so many displaced persons on this planet at one time;

40.8 million are displaced within their own country, 21.3 million are refugees, and 3.2 million are waiting asylum decisions, 12.4 were newly displaced in 2015 and even more so far in 2016. Sixty percent of those are from Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Worldwide, the vast majority of the refugees came from just three countries: Syria 4.9 million, Afghanistan 2.7 million and 1.1 million from Somalia.

Germany has taken in roughly a third of these fellow humans. As of September, the United States had admitted 10,000 Syrian refugees in our national resettlement program. Fewer than 10 have been settled in Iowa. Iowa has a long history of welcoming refugees and immigrants and the Ames Interfaith Refugee Alliance seeks to honor and continue this tradition.

Members of the Social Justice/Outreach team of Ames United Church of Christ identified refugee resettlement as a priority and because of the likely need to resettle more than one family and the complexity of resettling refugees decided that it would be best to seek other like-minded individuals in Ames churches. The group initially reached out through our Industrial Areas Foundation affiliate, A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy (AMOS), as well as local religious leaders.

The interest from other congregations was phenomenal. When the group held its first meeting, the Ames Interfaith Refugee Alliance (AIRA) was formed. The AIRA agreed to seek further membership and AIRA membership rapidly expanded into service and other community organizations. The initial activities of the AIRA included meeting with the US Committee on Immigrants and Refugees in Des Moines, inviting a city council member to discuss refugee placement in Ames. The overall working goals and objectives of AIRA are to 1) Seek to be inclusive; 2) Network with service providers; 3) Hold a Town Hall meeting; and 4) Address community concerns with refugee placement.

The first hurdle will be to secure approval from the State Department to settle refugees that have been vetted. The cost and availability of affordable housing will become one of the most immediate and long-term challenges for the Alliance. Like many small cities, Ames has a huge need for affordable housing. However, because Ames is a rapidly-growing university town rent prices have soared the past few years as Iowa State University keeps breaking records in attendance. This does have one advantage, though, as 110 countries are represented on the campus and, as a result, in the community. There is a large Muslim Student Association on campus and an active and centrally located mosque. Our church has also been active, through AMOS, in establishing a housing trust fund that will allow our county to access state monies to provide more access to housing (new, rental, and the like). We also recently donated \$40,000 for a Habitat for Humanity house.

We will invite area service providers (health, food, medical, etc.) to join in our work, many of which receive funding from Ames UCC. The Alliance also anticipates connecting with the Ames school system in order to prepare for admission of refugee children. The Ames schools provide an English as a second language program.

No mandate is clearer within our Bible than to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Time and again, God and the prophets of God return our attention to those in need, without protection and without homes. It is the same vision of beloved community that Jesus lived for unto death. As a congregation with a radically open table, we support this effort to make a safe landing for refugees here in central Iowa with our whole hearts (and bodies and minds and dollars).