



Offering Refuge. Inspiring Hope.

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First newcomer family arrives in Pella through PWC

In mid-February a new family in Pella woke up to snow for the very first time. Since that first morning, a father and daughter from Central America have been settling into their rental home, learning English, applying for jobs, making friends, and starting a new life in the U.S. This family relocated to Pella through Pella Welcome Corps (PWC).

"I've been struck by how kind, grateful and optimistic this family is," said Noreen Vander Wal, who serves on the first PWC Private Sponsorship Group as well as the PWC Advisory Board. "They have commented a few times about how safe they feel and how important that safety is to them."

A number of businesses and churches provided valuable resources, such as household goods, a welcome basket, bikes and bike helmets. Central College students and staff partnered to provide a rental house, interpretation and translation, pantry items, moving help, and general friendship.

"So many people in the community have been so very welcoming and generous," said Vander Wal. "It's truly humbling and heartwarming."

Since its first meeting in July 2023, Pella Welcome Corps moved from vision to reality. Teams were organized to explore how to provide housing, employment, education, orientation, transportation, interpretation, and medical care for a refugee family in Pella. A Pella Welcome Corps Facebook page was created, funds were raised, and news about the organizations was spread via radio, newspaper and church presentations.

In November the first Private Sponsorship Group (Pella PSG#1) was formed as a sub-group of the larger Pella Welcome Corps body. Five individuals passed background checks, completed online training and submitted a Welcome Plan in which they committed to support a newcomer family for their first three months as they adapt to life in the

U.S. By mid-January Pella PSG#1 was matched with a family, who arrived a few weeks later.

"It's a bit mind numbing to realize how quickly this all came together," said Vander Wal. "A lot of people did a lot of research, and it has gone amazingly well, so far. It definitely takes teamwork."

Meeting weekly in January and February, Pella PSG#1 worked to secure housing and basic necessities for their family. In addition to those meetings, additional training from Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services (IRIS) prepared them for assisting a refugee family. Cultural awareness, interpreter dynamics and available resources were just a few of the topics covered.

"IRIS has been a great resource to prepare us for welcoming our newcomers to Pella," said Vander Wal. "They answered many questions we had and helped us figure out the best way forward in several situations."

As Pella PSG#1 was preparing to welcome their first family to Pella, a newly established PWC Advisory Board was working to create a structure to support future Private Sponsorship Groups. Currently working under the umbrella of Crossroads of Pella, the PWC Advisory Board is developing bylaws to become an independent 501(c)(3) entity, as well as exploring structures to support future PSGs and the volunteers needed to assist families after they arrive.

"We will rely heavily on volunteers to provide help with things like translation, English language learning, transportation and cultural orientation," said Vander Wal. "It's important that these volunteers understand their roles and that we provide safe interactions for our newcomer families."

Current members of the PWC Advisory Board include chair Joan Corbin, Dayrel Gates, Laura Reif, Chris Allen and Noreen Vander Wal.

FAQs . . .

What is the difference between a PWC PSG and the PWC Advisory Board?

PSG stands for Private Sponsorship Group, a group of at least five everyday U.S. citizens who commit to sponsoring a refugee family. PSGs support newcomers financially in their first 90 days in the U.S. and assist them in accessing housing, employment, medical care, benefits, transportation and education. The PWC Advisory Board handles the administrative needs of Pella Welcome Corps: financial tracking, steps to becoming a 501(c)(3), communication, and volunteer training and management.

How can I learn more about sponsoring a refugee family?

- To learn about the U.S. Welcome Corps program, go to welcomecorps.org
- To learn more about how to become involved in Pella Welcome Corps, a local organization who helps interested individuals or groups navigate the Welcome Corps process, see our Pella Welcome Corps Facebook page or go to crossroadspella.org/welcome-corps
- An informational community meeting is being planned, so watch for upcoming announcements about a time and place. Specific questions can be sent to pellawelcomecorps@crossroadspella.org

What is the difference between a refugee and an immigrant?

A refugee is a person who has fled their own country because they are at risk of serious human rights violations and persecution there. The risks to their safety and life were so great that they felt they had no choice but to leave and seek safety outside their country because their own government cannot or will not protect them from those dangers. Refugees have a right to international protection. All refugees resettling in the U.S. have met the eligibility and admissibility criteria to be approved for resettlement through the US Refugee Admissions Program. Refugees undergo the most rigorous security screening of any individuals entering the U.S.

How can I help to support a newcomer family?

- A volunteer survey will soon be available, which will be posted on our Facebook page and communicated to churches. We will be looking for volunteers to translate, teach English, provide transportation, donate household goods, etc. Please realize that volunteer needs will ebb and flow. A family will need much support the first several weeks, and then less support as they “settle in.” Needs will vary from family to family, and there may be periods when no volunteers will be needed.
- To give financial support, visit crossroadspella.org/donate and **note that the donation is for Pella Welcome Corps.**

Why are they referred to as “newcomers” rather than refugees?

The word “refugee” looks back at where a family has come from and the negative things they have left behind. The word “newcomer” is a more welcoming, temporary description. They have arrived at a new place, but our hope is that they will soon feel comfortable and at home here.

Why wasn't more information about the first family shared?

While PWC realizes that everyone is interested in the newcomer family and is eager to know more about them and meet them, we have committed to confidentiality. Until a newcomer family arrives and agrees to share more information about themselves, Pella Welcome Corps can only share generalities such as “a Spanish-speaking family from Central America.”