



Stepping Up Our Support for Displaced Syrians

When the civil war in Syria broke out four years ago, creating a massive refugee crisis, Episcopal Relief & Development stepped up to the plate, working with our longtime partner - the Holy Land Institute for the Deaf - to provide vital support for children with disabilities at the Zaatari refugee camp just over the border in Jordan.

In the years since, the crisis has grown even more horrific due to the rise of ISIS and continued violent oppression by the Assad regime. Since the war's outbreak, more than 200,000 people have been killed, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Nearly 4 million people have fled Syria since the start of the conflict, and another 7.6 million Syrians have been internally displaced within the country, bringing the total number forced to flee their homes to more than 11 million - half of the country's pre-crisis population.

As the crisis has escalated, so too has Episcopal Relief & Development's response. Most recently, we have partnered with the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches - of which the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem is a member - to assist internally displaced people.

Right now the emphasis is on helping communities in relatively safe areas that become beacons for those who have been driven from their homes by bombings, terrorism and other violence. One such region, the coastal Tartous Governorate in western Syria, is currently home to over 200,000 displaced people. As the conflict continues to escalate, these communities are struggling to absorb the influx of people looking for shelter. Very little housing is available and the costs have skyrocketed, leaving the newly displaced to take residence in schools, unfinished buildings and other outdoor spaces.

To address these critical and rapidly growing needs, Episcopal Relief & Development is supporting efforts to provide cash aid to help displaced individuals and families access safe and adequate shelter. Cash is the most practical form of assistance considering current circumstances. To ensure security and accountability, our partners on the ground work closely with local clergy to distribute these funds for rent and fuel.

Because we're tapping into church infrastructure covering almost all of the governorates in Syria, there is already a large volunteer network of church youth and local coordinators serving in various logistical roles in the target areas. That network is key when trying to reach people in the midst of growing chaos and is what allows us to provide those in need with cash aid and, when possible, items such as food, fuel, heaters, kitchen utensils and bedding.

The need for this aid is exacerbated by the economic devastation that has accompanied the conflict. Unemployment rates are now as high as 85 percent in some areas and family savings have been depleted, leaving many to rely on assistance from local churches and humanitarian agencies. Many of the displaced in Syria lack the resources to leave the country and are unable to provide for their families. According to the U.N., four in every five Syrians now live in poverty.

With no resolution to the civil war in sight, the need for Episcopal Relief & Development and our community to do more will only grow. Members of the Episcopal Church in the U.S. are encouraged to pray for the people of Syria - including the minority Christian population, which faces additional threats - and to support efforts to alleviate the suffering of those left without homes or even hometowns.

