

# Central Vermont Refugee Action Network

Volunteer Handbook  
2023



CENTRAL VERMONT  
REFUGEE ACTION NETWORK

Welcoming New Vermonters  
to Visit, Work, and Live in  
Central Vermont

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to the Central Vermont Refugee Action Network (CVRAN). We appreciate your interest in CVRAN and your generosity in offering your time, skills, and compassion to the new Vermonters we serve. The purpose of this Handbook is to describe the work we do and provide a resource for volunteers. Working with our asylum seekers and refugee guests is a rich and rewarding experience, but it can also be challenging. The Volunteer Handbook is here to help, and so also are all of us in CVRAN.

The New Vermonters that CVRAN assists come from many different countries and are here for a variety of reasons. The people CVRAN serves, and the work our volunteers do with each group, are outlined below.

## **WHO CVRAN SERVES**

### **Asylum Seekers**

Asylum seekers flee countries around the world because of a fear of persecution, violence, and even torture. They arrive in the U.S. without the prior permission of the U.S. government and must apply for a grant of asylum. The legal process of preparing a case for asylum and receiving a ruling on it can take several years.

Volunteers from CVRAN sponsor asylum seekers and often help secure their release from detention. Host families house the asylum seekers until more permanent housing can be found. CVRAN volunteers provide asylum seekers with transportation, food resources, registering the children in schools, English language learning, medical help, driving lessons, and whatever else is needed.

CVRAN finds legal assistance to aid asylum seekers in applying for asylum status. Some time after their asylum cases are in process, asylum seekers are eligible to work. They are then able to secure social security numbers and employment authorization papers. Volunteers assist in helping asylum seekers get job training and find employment.

Throughout the entire process, as asylum seekers are learning about their new communities and becoming more self-sufficient, CVRAN volunteers are with them, providing help and support, social activities, and friendship.

### **Refugees**

Unlike asylum seekers, refugees are granted the protections of the U.S. government when they arrive. The Vermont branch of the United States Committee on Refugees and

Immigrants (USCRI) based in Colchester provides some initial financial support, housing, work authorization, and access to other benefits.

The Afghan refugees who were airlifted out of Afghanistan in August 2021 when the Taliban came into power, were given a less elevated status called humanitarian parole, which is a temporary status and must be renewed.

Just as CVRAN volunteers do with asylum seekers, CVRAN host families house refugees until more permanent housing can be found and assist them with transportation, food resources, registering the children in schools, English language learning, medical help, driving lessons, job searches, and whatever else is needed.

### **Migrant workers**

Migrant workers are primarily from Mexico and Central America and come to the U.S. to earn money for themselves and their families back in their home countries. They are undocumented and without the rights of asylum seekers and refugees. Migrant workers keep Vermont's dairy farms economically viable. Their living and working conditions can be unsafe. They face harassment, detention, and deportation from the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

CVRAN volunteers assist Migrant Justice, a non-profit organization based in Burlington VT, which organizes immigrant farm workers for economic justice and human rights. Once a year representatives from the Mexican Consulate in Boston, hosted by CVRAN and others, come to Montpelier to provide Mexican farm workers with identity documents, legal advice, and medical care.

## **ORGANIZATION OF VOLUNTEER PARTICIPATION**

**Volunteer Coordinator-** Once a volunteer submits an application online, the volunteer coordinator gets in touch with the new volunteer to discuss the volunteer's skills, interests, and availability. The volunteer coordinator may then recommend the new volunteer to a team leader or look into other areas where the new volunteer could assist. The Volunteer Coordinator keeps a database of volunteer interests to match volunteers with ongoing needs.

### **Teams and Team Leader**

Each asylum seeker or refugee is supported by a team of volunteers who share the responsibilities for supporting the new neighbor. A team leader coordinates and schedules the team members and handles new needs or problems as they arise. Team members provide transportation, food resources, clothing, help with school registrations, driver training, socialization, etc. - whatever is needed to settle in, adjust, and eventually become self-sufficient.

## **CVRAN OUTREACH**

**In-Person Presentations** - Volunteers speak about CVRAN's work to faith communities and civic organizations, highlighting our need for volunteers, host families, available housing, and financial resources.

**Media** - Volunteers work with the media to inform our local communities about CVRAN's activities. They also produce content for CVRAN's website and Facebook page.

**Educational Events** - Volunteers set up educational events to familiarize CVRAN members and our communities with the cultures, history, and experiences of new Vermonters.

**Fundraising** - Volunteers organize, promote, and administer activities to raise funds that directly support the people we serve. Fundraising activities include the Campaign for Affordable Housing, grant writing, ethnic dinners, sales of Equal Exchange products, and the March Arts Marathon (MAM) where participating artists send their donating sponsors a digital copy of their work everyday in March.

## **HOW TO BECOME A VOLUNTEER**

Complete the volunteer form on CVRAN's website **cvran.org**. Volunteer roles include language support, transportation, child care, home repair, community outreach, fundraising, and more. All volunteers are expected to read the Volunteer Handbook and also complete and submit a background check. Two website options for instant background check services are included in the volunteer form. The fee is reimbursable upon request.

Once your application has been submitted, you will be contacted by CVRAN and will begin the process of matching your skills and interests with our existing needs. Both the Volunteer Application and Volunteer Handbook are on the CVRAN website **cvran.org**. All volunteers are encouraged to read the Handbook and use it as a reference.

## **GUIDELINES FOR VOLUNTEERS**

### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality is vital to our work. A refuge or asylum seeker's background and reason for fleeing his/her country to seek refuge and asylum in the U.S. is confidential information and should not be shared.

The volunteer never asks about these reasons, and listens without comment if these circumstances are brought up by the guests. It is also important for their legal cases that they not tell their stories many times, because when stories are retold they often alter gradually, yet to be granted asylum they must recite their story exactly as they told it when they entered the country.

As a volunteer on a Support Team, you will be given only the details you need to fulfill your assignments by the Team Leader. Any information you may have about an asylum seeker or a refugee should not be shared with anyone unless there is a clear and specific reason relating to the guest's health and welfare. If you are in doubt about any issues, questions, or information about a guest you're working with, ask the Team Leader for clarification.

Do not share information about a guest through any type of social media because it could endanger them or their families in their home country. Be circumspect about what you share with friends and others. Avoid sharing the newcomer's country of origin unless the person is already publicly sharing that information. If pressed, you can speak broadly, giving the name of the continent the guest is from - South America, for example, or Africa.

## **Personal Safety**

CVRAN is committed to maintaining a culture that is respectful of the rights of guests and volunteers to interact in healthy and respectful relationships. CVRAN will not tolerate exploitive, coercive, or abusive behaviors or sexual misconduct toward any guest or volunteer. If an abusive act is criminal, it will be treated as such.

CVRAN also requires that anyone who observes or has knowledge of physical, emotional, or sexual misconduct report it immediately to the Team Leader. Anyone who in good faith reports violations of this policy can be assured that CVRAN will protect their confidentiality, strictly limiting the sharing of such information to a legitimate "need to know " basis.

If you are asked by one of the people you are assisting to do something you are uncomfortable with, trust your instincts. Tell the person that you must first ask the Team Leader.

## **Driving**

In order to drive on behalf of CVRAN you'll need to have completed your background check, be at least 21 years old, hold a valid driver's license, and operate a vehicle that is properly insured and inspected. While driving for CVRAN, you cannot be under the influence of alcohol or any drug (including prescription drugs) that would affect your driving performance. You also should not text, use a cellphone, or smoke.

When required or requested, please wear a mask while driving and while interacting indoors with guests or other CVRAN volunteers. Similarly, you have the right and the responsibility to ask passengers in your car as well as other occupants of an indoor space to wear masks when required or requested.

## **Record Keeping**

It is vital to keep careful records of all financial transactions made while acting as a volunteer for CVRAN. A credit card is available for certain pre-authorized expenditures. Personal checks can be reimbursed with the approval of the team leader. Every transaction should be accounted for - listed, dated, and with an explanation of its purpose. All such information should be given to the Team Leader who will forward it to CVRAN's treasurer.

## **Financial Considerations**

Volunteers should not give their own money to help asylum seekers or refugees. GoFundMe and similar private fundraising efforts require prior CVRAN leadership approval. Many asylum seekers and refugees have close family members in their home countries whom they are concerned about. They may want to send funds to support them. It is our policy that volunteers should not give funds to our guests for this purpose.

## **Cultural Considerations and Trauma**

Do not ask why our guests had to leave their countries. Asylum seekers and refugees have experienced substantial trauma. People process events in their own time and manner. They may choose not to remember or may want to avoid having to recount their experiences. This is their right. Our guests have come here against great odds to establish new lives, free of threats and violence. Our job as volunteers is to accept them as they present themselves, and simply to support and help them on this part of their journey.

What our new neighbors may or may not know about life in the U.S. should not be assumed. Common areas of cultural difference between Americans and people from other cultures may include attitudes toward work and education, behavioral norms between men and women and between parents and children, concepts of racism and equal rights, and treatment of individuals who identify as LGBTQ+.

Notions of time are also different in different cultures. Punctuality as it is commonly understood in the U.S. may be quite foreign to a guest from another country. When punctuality is required, with a scheduled appointment, for example, it's best to build in extra time.

Good communication with our guests will help them understand what is expected of them and what they can count on from us. Making expectations clear in advance is helpful in avoiding misunderstanding on both sides. When you are in doubt about these expectations, consult your Team Leader.

A new English speaker may nod, seemingly understanding your every word, but miss key concepts that you think have been imparted. Check for understanding as you go. Putting key points in simple writing, keeping appointments on a simple calendar, texting reminders are all important. The majority of our guests at this time use WhatsApp for their calling and texting since it is free even to other continents, and volunteers might want to use WhatsApp when sending a message.

**Thank you for being a volunteer.** We are grateful for your conviction and readiness to help our guests as they achieve safety and independence in our Central Vermont communities. In doing so you will become part of a community of volunteers who have opened their lives to offer this special kind of support. All of us at CVRAN are thankful for your commitment and best efforts in making our community a diverse and welcoming one.

