**District of Oak Bay and the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society Partner on Welcome House Project for Refugee Families**

**WORLD REFUGEE DAY: WEDNESDAY, JUNE 20, 2018**

Renovations championed by a generous and dedicated group of volunteers and businesses are underway at 1531 Hampshire Road as the District of Oak Bay and the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS) prepare to welcome a refugee family to the community.

The District of Oak Bay purchased 1531 Hampshire Road as a strategic asset anticipating future uses in the village. While this property will in the future support the growth in the village, the District has agreed to work with the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS) to enable an interim affordable housing opportunity for a family who are refugees.

**Quote: Mayor Nils Jensen, District of Oak Bay**

*“Working with the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society and the incredible number of volunteers who are providing free labour and materials to create homes for families seeking a safe and loving community is a humbling opportunity and the right thing to do. While we cannot alter the past for these individuals, we can play a significant role in helping them establish a new home and a kind, bright future. We look forward to welcoming these families into our community, into our schools, our businesses and into our hearts. It is the right to do.”*

**Quote: Mr. David Lau, Executive Director, VIRCS**

*“Victoria has only recently been designated as a Resettlement Area Program (RAP) location, however there has been no investment in providing housing resources.*

*We are absolutely delighted that Oak Bay is partnering with VIRCS to create a housing resource, and we are incredibly grateful to our amazingly generous corporate partners who are volunteering their time and resources to upgrade homes for our refugee families.”*

**Quote from one of the volunteers: Ms. Julia Schenck, Creative Director, ARYZE (250.884.4382)**ARYZE is providing project management, site labour, organized materials, coordinated resources and extended the opportunity to our network of sub-trades.

*“Refugee initiatives like Hampshire House and Monterey House help shape our*

*neighbourhoods for the better.”*

In the coming weeks, renovations are expected to begin on a neighbouring home acquired by the District at 1538 Monterey Avenue. This home will serve as the Welcome House coordination point where a VIRCS staff member will live and manage the day-to-day operations of both properties, supporting the successful transition of refugee families to their new lives. The Welcome House will be hosted by a mix of staff and community volunteers who are experienced with resettling refugees, trauma, language acquisition and other situations commonly faced by refugees.

**David Lau, Executive Director, VIRCS**

*“It will still take us several more months, significant effort and partnership to get both houses up and running, but we are heartfully pleased that the municipality and especially the Council has enabled us to solve a problem in a way that will be a source of local pride.”*

 VIRCS wishes to recognize the leadership of Mayor Jensen and Council in making these homes available, and the support and compassion of Oak Bay citizens for a vulnerable family seeking a new life and the opportunity to be contributing citizens. VIRCS wishes to thank all of the volunteers and contributing suppliers from across Greater Victoria communities for their generosity and heart-felt passion for this opportunity. The District and VIRCS along with all the contributors look forward to welcoming a family of six to their new home and new community later this summer. VIRCS will be extending an invitation to join them in welcoming the family at a public event once everyone is settled.

**Under the Welcome House cooperative agreement, the District of Oak Bay will:**

* Make 1531 Hampshire Road and 1538 Monterey Avenue available on an interim basis to VIRCS for housing
* Agreement is for a minimum of 2 years; a minimum one-year notification is required

**Under the Welcome House cooperative agreement, VIRCS will oversee the day-to day operations providing:**

* Affordable accommodation for refugees; Rents: $900.00 month for 1531 Hampshire and $1100.00 a month for 1538 Monterey
* Resettlement services
* Volunteering opportunities
* Community integration support
* Referrals to other local services and businesses and professionals

**Contributors and Volunteer groups currently working on the Welcome House include:**

* BIOPHILIA collective ltd (landscape services)
* Parker Johnson Roofing
* Harbour City Kitchens
* WestCoast Appliance
* Depend-a-dor
* Aryze Development and Construction
* IKEA
* Home Lumber
* Northern Sun Electrical
* Article Furniture
* Garrett Walters Painting
* Pardell Electric
* Brad Lawson Flooring
* Western Interior Design Group
* Slegg Lumber
* FLOFORM Countertops
* Over 600 ‘sweat equity’ hours contributed by more than 100 volunteers (skilled trades, students from Glenlyon Norfolk and Oak Bay High’s ‘Love Different’, Oddfellows and many citizens from throughout the Greater Victoria area)

***David Lau, Executive Director, VIRCS***

*“We will continue to work with Oak Bay residents as volunteers of these newly-renovated homes. The Welcome House project gives us a new opportunity to work with Oak Bay residents wishing to volunteer to help refugees learn about essential skills like shopping at a supermarket; going to the bank; signing up for swim lessons; and, exploring parks and recreation centres. We hope to work with local Oak Bay businesses so our residents can get their first opportunity learning Canadian work skills.”*

**How can people help? Donations needed.**

 **New, boxed items**: double beds, double sheet sets, pillow packs, toaster oven, crock pot, rice cooker, electric kettle, electric mixer, blender and flatware.

Please contact VIRCS’ Director, Geanine Robey

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**BACKGROUND:**

Who are Refugees?

* Refugees may come from camps, war-torn countries or countries where they

 live in limbo without formal status or security

* Refugees may also be fleeing targeted persecution due to their political opinions

 or affiliations, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation

* Refugees may have become separated from family members whose whereabouts

 is unknown or may be grieving the deaths of family, friends, and in general,

 the destruction wrought upon their lives and homeland

* Most arrive alone and isolated without the support networks we all take for

 granted

* Many arrive speaking only their own language or with rudimentary skills with

which to communicate in their new host country

* All have lost their livelihoods and must begin again in their new host country

**What is a Welcome House?**

A Welcome House is not: subsidized housing; permanent housing, a medical facility, a business, a hotel/motel, or an apartment building.

A Welcome House is a socially-proposed home that facilitates the resettlement of refugees who may have barriers to adjusting and integrating to life in Canada. The Welcome House on Monterey is hosted by a mix of staff and community volunteers who are experienced with resettling refugees, trauma, language acquisition and other situations commonly faced by refugees. The purpose of a Welcome House is to create a gentle transition into the community at a pace that enables incremental independence for the refugee family as they build personal capacities and create lasting community connections and a new life.

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