

‘It is a humanitarian crisis’: Religious groups mobilize to support migrants

By [Niki Griswold](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 14, 2024, 1 hour ago

For more than a year, the headlines have been stark. A surge of people fleeing political strife, street violence, and economic collapse in Haiti, Venezuela, and elsewhere, landing in Massachusetts. Emergency shelters full, officials scrambling to find safe spaces for mothers and children to sleep. Worries over money. Anger over federal inaction.

Behind those headlines, a network of religious leaders and organizations has been diligently working to help the thousands and thousands of newly arrived migrants find a foothold in their new land. They’ve become an essential part of the response to the unprecedented influx of migrants that has stretched the state’s emergency shelter system beyond capacity and prompted Governor Maura Healey to declare a state of emergency.

“This is a moral responsibility, a moral obligation, and we have always stepped up in situations such as this,” said the Rev. Miniard Culpepper, pastor of the Pleasant Hill Missionary Baptist Church in Dorchester, which is located near the Melnea Cass Center that state officials recently converted into an overflow shelter for homeless families, including newly arrived migrants.

His congregation is one of several area Black churches collecting needed goods to help people staying in the new shelter. It is part of their ministry and their faith to provide for those in need, Culpepper said.

The magnitude of the crisis has strengthened an interfaith coalition that includes the Catholic Church, Christian organizations of various denominations, and Jewish and Islamic nonprofits, united by the shared fundamental principle of providing for those in need.

Though they have supported migrants for years, they are expanding their efforts in the face of the growing problem — collaborating with the state and their communities to open emergency shelters, advocate for immigration reform and resources, solicit donations, and organize volunteers to help with translation and connecting migrants with state aid, and long term housing.

“It is a humanitarian crisis that we are facing at this time in Massachusetts,” said Pastor Dieufort Fleurissant, better known as Pastor Keke, the senior pastor of Total Health Christian Ministries in Mattapan and the executive director of True Alliance Center, a religious nonprofit that provides resources and advocates for the Haitian community.

“We need everyone in our common life to be stepping up,” said Rev. Laura Everett, executive director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, a network of 18 different denominations of orthodox and Protestant churches around the state. “It is incumbent upon all of us to use whatever power we have, and whatever resources we have, to do right by these people.”

As of Feb. 8, there are 3,717 families in the state’s emergency shelter system who entered as migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, according to the most recent state data. But that number is likely [far below the true count of](#) people who have arrived as part of the recent immigration wave, and their needs extend far beyond housing, Fleurissant said.

The pastor enlisted a group of 80 to 100 volunteers who speak Haitian Creole to help translate for new arrivals, heavily recruiting from the Haitian Evangelical Pastors Association of New England, and another nonprofit Haitian American group.

“They are fleeing from dangers to improve the quality of their life,” Fleurissant said. “All they’re looking for is a way out, to make sure that they can make a transition and find work and contribute to this society.”

Fleurissant said there’s an enormous need for financial donations, volunteers to teach migrant families English, and employers willing to hire migrant adults who have applied for work permits.

“We don’t need people who are experts, we need people who want to love their neighbor,” Everett, of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, said. “Maybe read a book to a child, or maybe sit with someone who is very far from home, and try to teach them English.”

Everett said her organization is closely collaborating with Pastor Keke, the Immigrant Family Services Institute, the Jewish Community Relations Council, the Boston Faith and Justice Network, and other religious groups, to find churches to act as daytime warming shelters, offer spaces for children and families to play, and host English classes for migrants.

The organization has also been tapping into its network of thousands of suburban and urban congregations to solicit financial donations and supplies, including winter coats and personal care items.

That moral and religious principle has also influenced the Islamic community's response to the migrant crisis. Imam Ahmad Barry, vice president of the Boston Islamic Interfaith Society, said individual families in his community have had to take in migrants from Senegal and Guinea who continue to arrive in Boston.

"If a migrant comes, they need shelter, you can't just turn them away, especially if they're from your tribe," Barry said. He added mosques are fundraising to provide migrants with money, clothing, and food, and trying to find them employment opportunities. But it's been a strain on their resources.

"We are doing our best, but our best is limited," he said.

Three year old Smaelle had breakfast in an overflow migrant shelter in the suburbs of Boston operated by Catholic Charities of Boston with funding from a state grant awarded to the United Way of Massachusetts Bay. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Within the Catholic Church, meanwhile, Cardinal Seán O'Malley of the Archdiocese of Boston in an October letter urged nearly 300 parishes to organize donation drives and identify buildings that could be used as emergency shelters.

In the past year, Catholic Charities Boston, a longtime shelter operator, increased its shelter beds by 130 percent by opening a new shelter last June and another two in the fall, according to Catholic Charities CEO and President Kelley Tuthill. All three emergency shelters are now at capacity.

"The team feels very responsible that nothing horrible happen on the streets of Boston," Tuthill said. "If there's some way we can help to alleviate suffering, we're trying to do that. [But] it's very challenging."

Catholic Charities also has a legal team who works with migrants on their immigration cases and work permits, and staff that provide case management to get people into permanent housing.

At Jewish Family Service of Metrowest, about 25 of its 80 employees work specifically on immigrant services, with the help of a third of its 350 active volunteers, said the organization's CEO Lino Covarrubias. The group has provided resettlement help for more than 40 years, and is leveraging its existing framework and staff experience to assist with the current migrant crisis.

Covarrubias said he hopes to soon finalize a contract with the state to begin transitioning migrants out of the shelter system into more permanent housing. Then the goal will be to help them write resumes, access training programs, and apply to jobs.

“It’s really important, particularly during this political atmosphere where migrants and immigrants are seen as a negative thing to our community ...[to say] the fact is that immigrants and migrants are needed in the Commonwealth,” Covarrubias said, referring to the current economic climate in which many employers are struggling to fill open jobs.

He nodded to the spiritual side of the equation, too: “It’s in everybody’s religious tenets, regardless of what denomination, to welcome the stranger and help those in need.”

To donate or volunteer, contact:

- [True Alliance Center](#), 617-749-6947
- [Immigrant Family Services Institute](#), 617-322-1348
- [Massachusetts Council of Churches](#), 617-523-2771
- [Catholic Charities Boston](#), 617-464-8500
- [Jewish Community Relations Council](#), 617-457-8600
- [Jewish Family Service of Metrowest](#), 508-875-3100
- [Boston Islamic Interfaith Society](#), 857-544-3970

Niki Griswold can be reached at niki.griswold@globe.com. Follow her [@nikigriswold](https://twitter.com/nikigriswold).