

OCRA 2020 Report

We are pleased to provide you with an outline of OCRA's 2020 activities and to report on how our sponsored refugees are doing, on the progress of our sponsorship applications, our funding progress and new developments over the course of the year.

All in all, 2020 presented some real challenges with refugee re-settlement, as you might expect during a pandemic. But we are optimistic that, with refugee travel resuming in a limited way, our sponsorships will advance, and that settlement activities will be easier should the pandemic become easier to manage in 2021.

I. OCRA 2.0 SPONSORSHIPS

Here are reports from the families who are close relatives of our OCRA families and who have been sponsored and re-settled by OCRA 2.0:

A. Abdurhaman Family – Being Processed in Nairobi/ Addis Ababa:

You may recall the history of Ahmed, the young boy from Eritrea, eldest son of our 2018-19 BVOR family, the Abdurhamans. Ahmed had not been able to travel with his mother and sisters when they fled Eritrea to join the father of the family in Ethiopia because the Eritrean Army would apprehend anyone travelling with a male of military drafting age, which started at age twelve. After the Abdurhamans reached Canada in December of 2018, we started a One Year Window Application, which allows for refugees to bring dependent children who had not accompanied them to Canada. Our application was accepted in June of 2019. To qualify for the Application, Ahmed had to leave Eritrea for Ethiopia. This young boy, 15 years old in early 2019, braved a multi-day walk (carried out at night) to the border of Ethiopia, and a nighttime run, through wilderness and hyena packs, of 10 kilometres to reach Ethiopia itself, and the relative safety of the Aysaita Refugee Camp where he remains.

Ahmed was poised to travel to Canada in early March 2020. His parents had signed the travel loan commitment that IRCC requires before travel can be booked in late February, IOM had advised IRCC in Nairobi, the Visa Office handling refugee applications from Ethiopia, that travel would be booked, and the IRCC Visa Office had advised IRCC in Ottawa that Ahmed would be arriving in Toronto, then Ottawa. In a cruel twist of fate, the March travel restrictions then prevented Ahmed from coming, and refugee travel was suspended. Our local MP's office is

working diligently to help Ahmed get renewed travel to join his family in Ottawa. Now that refugee travel has resumed on a small scale, we are hopeful that Ahmed will be able to travel to Canada soon. We are very concerned about the conflict in Ethiopia, and hope that it does not reach the Aysaita region, which lies to the west of Tigray, or further disrupt travel from Ethiopia.

Here is a photo of Ahmed at the Aysaita Camp:



B. Badrieh Agha Family – Being Processed in Amman, Jordan

Badrieh is a single mom with three children (including 1 adult son), from Syria and currently in Jordan. She is a beloved sister, aunt and sister-in-law of all the Othman Aghas. After a 15 month wait, her application was submitted to IRCC by the United Church of Canada in June 2020. We are hopeful that, Covid-19 restrictions permitting, Badrieh and her children will arrive in Canada in 2021.

C. Al Quadri Family – Arrived July 2018 from Turkey :

The FSG3 Group families (Al Halak / Alquadri sponsored under OCRA 2.0) are doing well. The support group had a distanced get together with both families at Mooney's Bay in September 2020, which is wonderful given the challenges of the times. Of note, Najlaa finished her high school equivalency program in December 2019. She was going to start a college program this September but is waiting until COVID is better and she can do it in person, as she finds remote learning too difficult at a college level with English being a second language. All of the kids in both the original and OCRA 2.0 sponsored families are doing very well, with Lana having started SK, and both Maher and Yousef enrolled in French immersion. Perhaps best of all, OCRA 2.0 kids Mustafa and Mohammad, who were forced to work as children while in Turkey to support their family, are both in grade 11 and doing well academically. Both plan to go to university and an education trust was set up for them by one of the support group members. Both teens are also working part-time (and worked all summer) and have bought a car for their family, which they can both drive. The group reports that "while Amer and Najlaa are doing well (and their English is now quite strong), it is all 5 of the kids from both families who are filling our hearts with joy."

D. Othman Agha Families – Arrived June 2019 from Jordan

In June 2019 the two Othman Agha families arrived in Ottawa. They are a large group, 11 people at the time of arrival. Both families found affordable housing, which in Ottawa in mid-2019 was generally very expensive, and everyone (except the oldest matriarch, age 62) enrolled in school. The families in Ottawa (Agha, Alabdullah) did a terrific job at settlement of the two groups. This can be a detailed, and at times complicated effort, and kudos go to the young adults/ teen in the Ottawa families who helped the process along. The sponsorship for these families ended in June 2020.

During the pandemic, the families were and still are able to rely on their close relatives here to avoid isolation. The documentary aspects of settlement at the beginning, such as CCB applications, hydro subsidy applications, OHIP registrations, SIN registrations, drivers' licence applications and road tests, tax returns, the sign-up for phones and internet at the beginning, all happened with the assistance of OCRA volunteers and family through 2019 and 2020, as did in-kind donations from the OCRA network of clothing and furniture. But it was the families

themselves, who introduced the new arrivals to Canada in a more substantive way, and did a great job at integrating both families with their own lives, and with life in Canada.

The Osama Agha Family remains very busy. Islam completed a year at Glebe and now enjoys attending the Adult High School to further her education and equip her to work in Canada. The twins Mohammad Nour and Mulham enthusiastically started Kindergarten this September. The baby, Alaa Al Din, is growing like a weed, and Nour and Osama are attending in-person and online ESL.

In the other Othman Agha family, teenager Nagham managed well with online courses and really welcomed her September return to school at Glebe in Grade 10 ESL, where she can see friends and attend classes in person. Fatima, Fadi and Sausan are doing on-line and in person ESL.

The big news in 2020 was that Fadi and Sausan welcomed baby Rose to the world on May 17, 2020. Mom and baby are healthy, and the baby is cute as a button! At the end of the sponsorship, the combined family of Fatima, Fatina, Fadi, Sausan and Nagham, who had shared accommodation for the first year, were successfully moved to separate accommodations: Fadi, Sausan and Rose have a one bedroom near Carlington, and Fatima, Fatina and Nagham got an apartment with Centretown Citizen's Ottawa Corporation, landlord to a number of OCRA families, in Centretown.

E. Wafaa Hamami – Arrived February 2020 from Lebanon

The members of OCRA FSG8 and the Agha Family were overjoyed when Wafaa Hamami, the mother of Najlaa, grandmother to Khaled, Mohammad, Osama, Rahaf and Wissam, arrived 4 weeks before the pandemic travel restrictions and closures, on February 11, 2010. Wafaa was the first sponsorship that OCRA 2.0 submitted back in 2017. It was very gratifying to see her arrive, finally.

Wafaa has settled well, at the Agha home. The documentary duties of settlement were carried out by OCRA volunteers, with excellent assistance from Khaled Agha. Wafaa was registered at the Ottawa Newcomer's Health Clinic and with a dentist. In addition, Wafaa has been well integrated into family life with the Aghas. She is receiving the dental and medical care that she

needs, and her oral and physical health are improving after the long years without access to care in Lebanon.

F. Al Othman Family – Arrived February 2020 from Lebanon

The Al Othman Family arrived in late February 2020, just three weeks before the travel restrictions and pandemic closures occurred. Before their arrival, OCRA volunteers worked to obtain furniture, clothing and household supplies. Importantly, housing near the Hekmat Al Othman / Sahar Sharbek family in the Bank/ Hunt Club area was secured for March 1. OCRA volunteers, and teen volunteers Mohammad, (another) Mohammad and Feras helped the family move into a quite fully stocked apartment. In-kind donations of furniture, baby equipment and more were obtained from Judy Wright's marvelous network and OCRA's basement stash, and from OCRA volunteers Suzy Fraser and Michelle Coyne.

It has been a challenging to provide settlement assistance to the young and busy Al Othman family during the pandemic. We have tried our best to accomplish immediate needs on-line and through in-person appointments where these have been needed, such as medical visits, appointments to get OHIP registrations and cards, hydro subsidies, CCB and other applications, replacing an essential phone thrown over the balcony by a mischievous two year old, etc. This has generally worked well. The positive thing, though, is that Mohammad and his spouse Wafaa are both young, and are game to try anything on-line with volunteers. This in turn enabled us to set up English tutoring for Wafaa, who has young children and cannot attend in-person English school. With the fantastic commitment of Kathy Stewart, Wafaa has obtained an English vocabulary of over 150 words, and is able to say simple sentences in conversation. Wafaa does this on WhatsApp with three children under age three on her lap or in the very near vicinity, and other times while doing dishes and preparing meals.

Mohammad, the Dad in the family, maintains a positive outlook. He was injured in Syria and needs medical attention. We have been able to get Mohammad and his family a family doctor in their neighbourhood, and also a referral to an orthopedic surgeon for his injured leg. Mohammad is doing online ESL learning with OCISO, but will be glad when he can attend in-person classes. He works hard to communicate in English. Because of that we are able to get most things done.

The happy news for this family is that Wafaa arrived in Canada almost 5 months' pregnant, and delivered a healthy baby girl on July 28, 2020. The family now has three girls under the age of 3,

and Wafaa is under age 25. She shows real drive to get an education and learn, despite her demands with the children and in the home.

This family is doing well despite the restrictions of the pandemic. They have found their first months to be isolating in an apartment tower with limited outdoor activity. Mohammad says, though, that these drawbacks are nothing compared to what they endured in Lebanon, and he reiterates how happy they are to be here in Canada, and how it is such a relief to feel safe, and that they can begin to build a new life here.

The family will need help to search for bigger accommodation than the one bedroom they have currently, for March 1, and to help Mohammad to obtain the medical help he needs, and concomitant support from Ontario Works or ODSP.

II. NEW OCRA 2.0 SPONSORSHIPS - 2020

A. Al Halak Family

FSG3 has decided to sponsor Amer Halak's sister and family, originally Syria and now in Turkey with no realistic hope of re-settlement. This is a family of 5. The sponsorship should be ready for submission to First United Church Ottawa / United Church of Canada by the end of 2020. This sponsorship is funded through pledges and OCRA donations.

B. Almobarak

This sponsorship is for a young Syrian woman on her own in the Mount Lebanon area of Lebanon. Anaam is in her early twenties, lives in very vulnerable circumstances, as she does not qualify for a residency permit and is a survivor of spousal abuse and workplace sexual harassment in Lebanon. Anaam's family has raised the funds for her financial support under the sponsorship and asked OCRA 2.0 for help with the sponsorship process. OCRA 2.0 will co-sponsor the application, handle communications with First United / United Church and IRCC, and help where needed with the sponsorship support. This application was submitted to First United Church Ottawa / United Church of Canada in November 2020.

C. Alrefai Family

This sponsorship request came from a smaller sponsorship group in Ottawa, on referral from the Anglican Diocese. Yursa Alrifai and her husband came to Canada as Government Assisted

Refugees in 2017. They are young and have opened a successful barbershop in Orleans. They have saved the funds necessary to sponsor Yursa's brother Mohammad and his family, who are currently in Irbid, Jordan, and will house the family in the house they are building in Orleans. Mohammad is a commercial metal worker and hopes to qualify for such work in Canada. OCRA will co-sponsor this application, handle the relationship with First United Church Ottawa and the United Church, and help out the settlement support group where needed. This sponsorship application was submitted to First United/ United Church of Canada in November 2020.

D. Farhani/ Navaseri Family – Australia – VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

This sponsorship request came to OCRA from Melbourne, Australia via Natalie Maione at Helping with Furniture here in Ottawa. The Australian Group, called Grandmothers for Refugees, has asked if OCRA could help sponsor a family of 5, originally from southwestern Iraq. Here is the description of the family's circumstances from the Australian group:

Kamal and Elham are from Ahwaz in South-West Iran. They are Arab Iranian, a minority discriminated against in that country. Both are tertiary educated and speak English. Kamal was a trades teacher and Elham a primary school teacher in Iran and then Kamal moved on to be a technician in a power plant. He speaks Persian well but when he stood up for fellow workers who had not been paid for months and they discovered he was Arab rather than Persian, he became a target of the authorities. Six times he was subjected to arrest (or simply being picked up and held for up to two weeks) and tortured. Finally, the family was able to get visas to leave the country and they fled, flying to Indonesia and then taking a boat in the hope of reaching safety in Australia. They arrived in July 2013 just weeks after our then Prime Minister announced no person arriving by boat would ever settle in Australia. They had no knowledge of that announcement, nor its implications for them.

For more than seven years, this family has done a wonderful job under extreme pressure to stay together and hang on to hope. I fear that if we are not able to help this family soon to begin rebuilding their lives in a safe community, the situation for them will get worse.

Kamal and Elham are in community detention in Melbourne after being on Christmas Island in 2013, then Nauru, evacuated on health grounds to onshore locked detention, and then kept in community detention in Melbourne since December 2015. The five (including the youngest, who was born in Australia) have been recognised as refugees by the Nauran Government.

Kamal's health has been compromised because of the torture he suffered in Iran and through the vicious cycle of hopelessness brought on by detention and not being able to work and provide for his family. But he is resilient and will be much improved and able to work if given the chance.

Grandmothers for Refugees has launched a fundraising campaign in Melbourne, and in Australia more broadly, to raise \$40,000 to support this family if they are accepted to come to Canada.

OCRA 2.0 is seeking volunteers to staff a Family Support Group for this family. We have 5 volunteers so far. All are welcome to help, no experience is required. Settling a refugee family new to Canada can be a very rewarding experience, with long-lasting relationships often the result. Ottawa has a large Middle Eastern community to help integrate this family. The parents both bring a good higher education and skills to assist with finding work, and already speak good English. We think supporting this family will be a rewarding experience. And by then, more contact may be permitted if the pandemic has abated. Here is a photo sent by our Australian contact:



We will bring the application in December 2020 or January 2021, as soon as funding is reasonably secured, and we expect an arrival in 2021 -2022. Please get in touch with us at ocra613@gmail.com or send us a message on our [Facebook](#) page if you have any questions or would like to volunteer. We would really appreciate your help!

III. NEW SPONSORSHIP REQUESTS – 2021

OCRA recognizes that not all groups can fund, or raise funds, to support a refugee sponsorship. If our OCRA families present a case for sponsorship of close relatives, we have tried to respond where this is feasible, and if we see a good chance for successful integration in Canada, with effective and primary involvement by the OCRA family themselves. Here are two requests from OCRA families that have not yet been funded. Each of these sponsorships would also need volunteers for support groups, a responsibility that can be shared with the family in Ottawa:

A. Hind Agha Family

This family of 3 is from Syria and currently resides in Irbid, Jordan. Hind Agha is Alaa and Osama Agha's older sister. Her husband was taken away by Syrian intelligence in 2012 and has not been heard of since. Hind helped her brothers and sisters to find shelter in Damascus during the bombing of the southern suburbs and also helped her siblings to exit the Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan and find shelter in Irbid. **Cost to sponsor: \$34,000**

B. Ousman Ahmed Mohammed Family

This family of 4 are from Eritrea, currently in Ethiopia. They have taken care of young Ahmed Abdurhamen, who OCRA has sponsored under the One Year Window stream, and have helped Ahmed immensely. Ousman is a close cousin of Ahmed's mother, Meryam, who is here in Ottawa. **Cost to sponsor: \$34,000**

IV. DONATIONS FOR OCRA REFUGEE SPONSORSHIPS

All donated funds are used for the financial support of sponsored refugees. OCRA does not pay employees or volunteers and does not use contributions to reimburse administrative costs. For a tax receipt, donations of \$100 or more can be made by cheque or draft payable to **First United Church Ottawa**, and delivered to OCRA at **164 Glebe Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario K1S 2C5**. We will make sure the cheques are delivered to the church and allocated to OCRA sponsorships.

And if you would prefer to do so, you can now e-transfer a donation in any amount to treasurer@firstunitedchurchottawa.org, but **please specify “For OCRA sponsorships”** in the message line, and **if you have not donated before, please also provide your address** so a tax receipt can be issued. It would be really helpful if you could pop OCCRA an email to let us know you have made an e-transfer, so we can keep our records in good order.

Donations can be made on our website at <http://refugeeaction.ca/donate/>. We cannot issue a charitable tax receipt for these donations.

V. OCRA 2.0 SPONSORSHIP STATISTICS AND FUNDRAISING PROGRESS

Here is a brief point form overview of OCRA 2.0 sponsorships and fundraising progress:

- 12 OCRA 2015-2016 BVOR sponsorships
- 1 OCRA 2.0 BVOR sponsorship 2018 - 2019
- 7 OCRA 2.0 private sponsorships applications for close relatives of OCRA BVOR families 2017 -2019
- 5 of 7 privately sponsored OCRA 2.0 families landed and re-settled in Ottawa in 2018 – 2020.
- 2 OCRA 2.0 sponsorships are still being processed. Significant delays have been incurred due to Covid-19 restrictions on travel.
- A total of \$262,968 raised/ pledged to fund the 7 OCRA 2.0 sponsorships and the new 2020 OCRA-funded sponsorship. THANKYOU!
- 4 new sponsorship applications (3 funded outside OCRA, 1 funded by OCRA and OCRA Group members) to be filed in 2020 - 21 (See “New Sponsorships” section of Report.)
- **2 new requests for OCRA 2.0 sponsorships – these requests are not funded, and are the reason we are seeking to raise funds.** (See “New Requests section of Report).

THANK YOU FOR READING! WE HOPE YOU HAVE A HEALTHY, HAPPY AND SAFE HOLIDAY SEASON, AND WISH YOU THE VERY BEST FOR 2021! STAY WELL, EVERYONE.