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CANADA'S NEWSLETTER ON REFUGEES

# REFUGEE

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## *Baha'is*

### *A Model of Private Sponsorship*

From an Interview with Carolyn Dowdell

*Is* private sponsorship obsolete? The statistics suggest it is at least heading that way. There has been a precipitous decline in the private sponsorship of refugees since the peak of 1979-80 when 35,899 Indochinese refugees were privately sponsored to Canada. Since then, only 4,694 privately sponsored refugees have come to Canada. But in the midst of this decline one extraordinary program of private sponsorship stands out: the very original and highly successful effort of the Baha'is in Canada.

#### *The Unique Baha'i Model*

There are 20,000 Baha'is in Canada, living in 1,500 localities. In 325 of those localities there are enough Baha'is to have a local elected spiritual assembly of nine. These local spiritual assemblies elect a national spiritual assembly. The national spiritual assembly signed an umbrella agreement with Employment and Immigration Canada under which it assumes full responsibility for sponsorships undertaken by its constituent members.

During the Indochinese movement some organizations — most notably the Anglican Church and the Canadian Jewish Congress — did not sign such umbrella agreements. They preferred to leave the initiation of and responsibility for individual sponsorships to local groups, with the central organization acting primarily as a publicist. Other organizations signed umbrella agreements and acted as guarantors of sponsorships by local groups. The

Mennonite Central Committee and the Christian Reformed Church not only signed umbrella agreements to act as guarantors; they very actively encouraged, coordinated and backed up local sponsorship efforts.

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is is going a step beyond the direction of the Mennonites and the Christian Reformed Church. The national assembly is itself the sponsor of all the Baha'i refugees coming to Canada. It then assigns a refugee or a group of refugees to a local spiritual assembly, or even to a local group of Baha'is if a locality has too few Baha'is to constitute an assembly. That group agrees to accept immediate responsibility for the settlement of the refugees. Funds for the sponsorship are distributed to the local groups from a centrally located fund for relief. Thus the formal sponsorship is centralized. The fundraising is centralized. The distribution of the funds is centralized to even

out the cost. The human responsibilities are localized. The resultant costs are \$500 - \$1,000 per refugee, significantly less than the \$2,100 per refugee spent on basic living allowances for government-assisted refugees under the Indochinese refugee program.

Another unique feature of the Baha'i model is that the refugees are given these monies as an interest-free loan, the repayment of which is spaced over a long period of time and which, under special circumstances, may be forgiven. The national community model of private sponsorship is uniquely conjoined with placing the ultimate responsibility for cost on the individual refugees. At the same time, the plan permits a great deal of flexibility. A refugee sent to Sudbury who is unable to find a job can be moved rapidly to another area where a support group will be readily available.

So far, 200 Baha'i refugees have arrived

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