

## IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE SERVICES

# A Culture of Care in Rural Idaho

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At the close of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI held up the parable of the Good Samaritan as the model of Catholic spiritual and active life. Inspired by this ideal, Catholic Charities of Idaho (CCI) strives to be the “Good Samaritan” to those most in need here in the Gem State. This work of renewal has energized our commitment to poor and marginalized families and helped us better understand and realize our mission as the caring and skilled social service arm of the Diocese of Boise.

The Diocese of Boise is a Catholic Extension “mission Diocese”, described colloquially as “the Church in frontier America” at the time of this designation many years ago. In many ways that description still holds. Eighty-five percent of our counties are rural and economically distressed, with 23 percent of rural residents receiving public assistance and over 17 percent earning incomes below the poverty level. The agricultural heartland of our state is the Snake River Plain that sweeps across southern Idaho. There we produce our famous potatoes, as well as beef cattle, hay, wheat, milk, barley, and sugar beets. It is also home to our most diverse and disadvantaged residents. Nearly 30 percent of the residents in this region are Latino, and many are still newly arriving migrant workers. Approximately 25 percent of the Latino population in rural southern Idaho is undocumented.

Even though we are still a “baby” Catholic Charities, founded just 17 years ago, and we work in a low-resourced mission diocese, we seek to have real and lasting impact in the lives of those we serve. Our work is expressed succinctly in our Framework for Service and Ministry that was approved by our Board of Directors in December 2016, which sets the course for our services and ministries well into the next decade. This Framework mirrors many of the initiatives of our sister agencies across the country and commits us to alleviating, reducing, and, if possible, permanently ending poverty for those we serve. More importantly, it calls us to an awakened sense of the dignity, resourcefulness, and resilience of those we assist and the importance, if our work is to be authentic, of the virtue of hope. To be apostles of hope means to encounter, accompany and empower persons in need, not simply “doing for them.” Only in this way can our mission properly express Christian love, a love that is generous, respectful, and free of condescension or patronage.



Let me share briefly about the tangible progress we are making. Last fall, Bishop Peter Christensen dedicated a new Catholic Charities office in Boise, designed for professional clinical and legal services that meet today's urgent need for high quality advocacy and support. In addition, in January, we opened a small but beautiful center in Idaho Falls. These two locations, which anchor our work at both ends of the Snake River agricultural region, exemplify a welcoming, attentive and skilled service environment. They are, I'm proud to say, bright centers of care, trust, and affection for all who come seeking assistance. These offices are now open every day to individuals and families seeking assistance of any kind. CCI Client Assistance and Resource Advocates (CARAs) provide linkage to critically needed emergency assistance and basic resources like housing, utility assistance, clothing, food, and other essentials. In the past year more than 3,000 such linkages were made. Our staff are multi-lingual and bring diverse cultural competencies that enhance our effectiveness with clients from other countries.

As a new and small Catholic Charities, we don't yet have the resources to open permanent service centers all across the 250 miles of rural Idaho between Boise and Idaho Falls, nor up the long northern panhandle of our state. But true to our frontier spirit (and the wonders of the modern Interstate) our staff travel to parishes, missions, and community centers embedded in small, remote communities across Idaho that call us to service. Here we offer information "charlas" before and after local Spanish Masses, provide parenting classes while children attend religious education instruction, and facilitate evening and weekend services (Know Your Rights presentations, basic immigration classes, and citizenship preparation instruction). We facilitate immigration group processing workshops in places like Blackfoot, Fruitland and Jerome that allow us to reach deep into the poor, rural areas of our state. We also make generous use of phone consultation services for immigration clients who live in isolated areas. Bishop Peter Christensen of the Boise Diocese has stated that "the best, most foolproof sanctuary we can offer others is to help them make this their naturalized home if they so choose." We aim to make that invitation real and achievable for our immigrant and refugee neighbors who choose the path of US citizenship.

These are especially unsettled times for Idaho newcomer communities. Changes in US immigration policy and enforcement procedures have excited anxiety, passion, and alarm and have made lack of legal status a particularly vulnerable way of life for many in rural areas. Recognizing that this is a reality for a large segment of people with whom we share a common community life, we're "thinking outside the box" as we search for ways to cost-effectively engage with and reach immigrant families in need across our service area: 83,000 square miles. Thinking outside the box is part of our frontier identity!

We're presently expanding outreach efforts to include language and culturally-appropriate abuse awareness information, substance abuse prevention, and financial literacy classes and coaching services. Plans are underway for the introduction of Spanish language adult basic education (Plaza Comunitaria services common to many Catholic Charities) and English for non-native speakers' instruction. We're building on a new Fatherhood initiative in Idaho Falls by working with diocesan clergy to offer group services – pastoral and clinical – for Latino men to address issues like cultural identify, self-esteem, depression, alcohol addiction, marital and relationship challenges, pornography, and stress. We are also introducing onsite Spanish language counseling services in a parish located in high need Canyon County. Finally, while our work with the immigrant community is not always well understood in a politically conservative state like Idaho, we've made inroads by reaching out to the farming community, forming an alliance around common goals: constructive immigration reform, support for the unique needs and issues rural farming communities face, and recognition that our immigrant brothers and sisters are hard-working, family-oriented individuals who are assets to our communities and critical to the economic success of our agricultural sector.

Our Holy Father invites all of us to promote a “culture of care” with hearts that are filled with compassion and eyes and ears that are attentive. His challenge to “be in the streets” and in solidarity with those suffering, by way of encounter and accompaniment, speaks to the heart of the Catholic Charities mission and our work here in the Diocese of Boise. A great splendor and vigor in the Church is the ministry of walking alongside of those in weakness and need, especially the rural poor and marginalized. Let that be so! Let it continue to be true for the Diocese of Boise and for Catholic Charities of Idaho.

(This article, written by Douglas Alles, executive director, Catholic Charities of Idaho, appeared originally in the [fall 2017 issue](#) of Charities USA magazine.)