



Editorial: We can do more for refugees

September 9, 2015

We know the words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, words that have welcomed millions: "Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. ."

Here's a contemporary variation on those stirring sentiments, as voiced by Icelanders in an open letter to their welfare minister: "Refugees are our future spouses, best friends, or soulmates, the drummer for the band of our children, our next colleague, Miss Iceland in 2022, the carpenter who finally finished the bathroom, the cook in the cafeteria, the fireman, the computer genius, or the television host" (quoted by [James Fallows](#) on The Atlantic website).

The United States is considering bringing to this country about 1,500 refugees from war, terrorism and chaos in Syria and neighboring countries. This country of refugees and immigrants can do more, much more. If Germany, a country with one-fourth the population of the U.S., can accept 800,000 desperate and suffering men, women and children, then so can we. If Icelanders are willing to open their homes, so can we.

[Eric P. Schwartz](#), a former assistant secretary of state for population, refugees and migration, told the [New York Times](#) recently that increasing the number of Syrians granted asylum by 50,000 on an emergency basis would help by sending "an extremely powerful signal to Europe and to the world." It would, indeed, and yet 50,000 is still a relatively small number.

[Alex Nowrasteh](#), an immigration policy analyst at the [Cato Institute](#), has urged the State Department to allow individual Americans and charities to sponsor refugees without any quota. "Americans," he noted in a Washington Post article, "gave over \$350 billion to private charities in 2014 - \$1,100 per American and the most generous in the world. It's hard to imagine that they wouldn't be willing to aid refugees in their new life here. If only the government would let them."

Houston, home to a large Syrian-American population, already is helping. As the Chronicle noted in "Houston comes to aid of Syrian refugees" (Page B3, Sunday), individual volunteers, [Helping Hand USA](#) and other groups have been busy putting together care packages for the thousands of Syrians and Palestinian refugees who have fled to Jordan. That same spirit of generosity fed, clothed and housed thousands of Katrina evacuees a decade ago. We know how to do it. Still, we can do more.

At a time when the political conversation has focused on erecting border walls and kicking people out of the country, our response to the Syrian crisis offers an opportunity to duplicate our

absorption of immigrants and refugees in times past: Hungary in the late 1950s; Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in the 1970s; Cuba and Russia in the 1980s; Iraq and Afghanistan more recently.

Despite moments when we have failed to honor our proud immigrant heritage - most egregiously with Jewish refugees from Nazi-dominated Europe - we have a legacy to live up to, a moral imperative to adhere to. As Fallows notes in his Atlantic article, absorbing immigrants and refugees is always disruptive. Nonetheless, it's invariably made us stronger.