



Restoring Dignity  
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*"I want to go home,  
but home is the mouth of a shark  
home is the barrel of the gun  
and no one would leave home  
unless home chased you to the shore."*

-Warsan Shire, Somali refugee poet

***What is home?*** You are probably reading this letter now in yours. After a brutal day out in the world, there is no better sanctuary than the arms of the couch in the living room or the softness of the blanket covering your bed. We spend our lives making our homes into places of refuge, where we can escape from the uncertainty of life and find a moment of peace with the people, animals, and special possessions we love. And that is the way it is supposed to be. Each of us, as humans, longs for safety, security, and love. It is the heart of what it means to be a person. *Your home is sacred, as it should be.*

In the world right now, there are an estimated 108 million people who have been displaced from their homes due to war, persecution, genocide, violence, and other human rights violations. 108 million people who cannot go home after a long day and sink into safety and security. That number feels overwhelming. And yet, we must respond. *We all must do what we can, where we are, with what we have.* Whatever we would want others to do for us if we became refugees, that is what we must do for our refugee friends. In Omaha, we have tens of thousands of incredible individuals who have found a new home in this city. Tens of thousands of people building new lives and feeling safety and security once more. Our city and our citizens are playing active roles in trying to right the wrongs that refugees have experienced across the globe. And that's good news that needs to be celebrated!

Restoring Dignity is a vessel that allows talented and good-hearted people the opportunity to band together to create positive change. In 2023, we ran a furniture bank so that refugee families could

get the furniture and home items they needed to furnish their homes. We taught in-home acclimation classes where families learned how to clean and maintain their new home environment and were taught how to keep their homes safe from fire. We created Omaha's first emergency alert network so that emergency notifications can reach communities that haven't had the chance to learn English yet. We developed Omaha's first refugee planning study, which will be completed by mid-2024. We completed two home makeovers for families going through serious situations. Among many other things!

The incredible people who make up Restoring Dignity: staff, volunteers, board members, and donors, continuously rise to whatever comes along. There is no obstacle too large, no issue too formidable that we cannot chip away at and eventually overcome. There is much distress in this world, but there are also many people willing and eager to combat anguish and reduce unnecessary suffering as much as possible. Everything we do at Restoring Dignity aims to restore the lives of people who have had everything taken from them. Being a refugee is not a choice. Choosing to be here for our newest neighbors is one that we will keep saying "yes" to every day.

Thank you for continuing to say "yes" and for supporting Restoring Dignity and the amazing refugee families we serve!

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## 2023 Highlights

### Welcome Home Program

- Our **Welcome Home Program** continues to grow, and we have added additional educators, which means that classes are being taught in more languages! Our two core classes, **Healthy Home** (cleaning) and **Home/Fire Safety**, continue to be taught to thousands of people each year. At the end of 2023, we finished the curriculum for our newest set of classes: **Home Owners Maintenance Education (HOME)**. These classes teach refugee homeowners how to perform basic home maintenance.
- Our **Healthy Home** classes continue to teach families how to keep their homes clean and healthy. The majority of families we teach came from refugee camps, where there was no plumbing, electricity, refrigeration, or appliances. If no one teaches families how to clean and maintain their homes, many end up randomly guessing cleaning products at the store, which has led to safety issues. In our classes, families receive a **cleaning starter kit** with waterproof, translated tags placed on each bottle of cleaning product. Our family educators go room by room with family members and demonstrate each product and different cleaning techniques. Families then practice, and educators observe and reteach as necessary. The

process takes several hours and includes all family members. We then follow up with the family and reteach to ensure full understanding.

- For our **Home/Fire Safety** classes, families are taught hands-on, in-home education about fire safety. We install smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, teach families how to use fire extinguishers, explain how to recognize the smell of gas, discuss the safety procedure of what to do when gas is smelled, educate about the weather, electrical systems, candles, space heaters, grilling safety and a whole host of other critical topics! We teach these classes in partnership with the American Red Cross, who provides all of the smoke detectors.
- Our newest **Home Owners Maintenance Education (HOME)** classes are teaching refugee families how to maintain the house they have purchased. Topics taught include how to: use a power drill, reset circuit breakers, change furnace filters, unclog a drain, turn the water off in the house, change the water heater temperature, and much more! We teach 41 core home maintenance topics over the course of four in-home classes. A total of eight hours per family is spent teaching hands-on home maintenance that will give families the knowledge and skills they need to prolong the life of their home.
- In 2023, we taught **1,695 in-home classes**: 441 Healthy Home and 1,254 Home and Fire Safety classes. We impacted a total of 634 families and provided 6,641 cleaning items and 423 complete home/fire safety kits (fire extinguishers, smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, and fire escape planning tools). A total of **3,349 lives were impacted through these classes**, including the lives of 1,613 children. Our classes were taught in 11 languages, and individuals in our program identified with 25 different ethnicities (we have taught a total of 32 ethnic groups since this program began in 2019). Half of the families reported a total combined household income of \$40,000 a year or less. 49% of program participants reported having an incomplete education experience as a child in their home countries due to instability and a lack of educational resources. 22.87% reported no educational opportunities in their lifetime. 73% of program participants have lived in the USA for over 5 years.
- In 2023, we had **nine family educators teaching in 11 languages**: Arabic, Burmese, Dari/Farsi, Karen, Karenni, Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, Kiswahili, Nepali, Nuer and Pashto.
- Going into 2024, we have **five full-time and nine part-time employees**. Of our 14 staff, 11 (79%) are former refugees.

### **Furniture Bank**

- In December 2021, Restoring Dignity and The Furniture Project started off on a journey to create **Omaha's first furniture bank**. At the end of 2023, the infrastructure was successfully

built, and our friends at The Furniture Project were ready to run the space without our assistance. In September 2023, Restoring Dignity moved out of the furniture bank and into our new offices at the Yates Illuminates building. On December 31st, 2023, we completely phased out of all operations, and the Furniture Project is now the sole operator of the 18,000-square-foot furniture bank warehouse! They are doing a wonderful job keeping this critical piece of furniture justice infrastructure up and running!

- Through Restoring Dignity's **in-person shopping** at the furniture bank in 2023, there were 188 former refugee families who came and picked out items they needed in their homes. A total of **1,037 lives were touched through family shopping**, including 540 children! Families who shopped came from the following countries: Kenya, Afghanistan, Sudan, Ukraine, Burma, Syria, Thailand, Congo, Libya, Mexico, Guatemala, and Ethiopia. Since Restoring Dignity is no longer present at the furniture bank, we will not shop with families anymore. However, our friends at The Furniture Project have graciously agreed to continue allowing our families the option to pick out furniture and household items in person.

### Emergency Alert Network

- We collaborated with our partner, Douglas County Health Department, to create Omaha's first **Emergency Alert Network**. This network allows the Health Department, City of Omaha, OPPD, and MUD to **send urgent messages to refugee and immigrant community leaders**, who then get the information out to their communities. When emergencies happen, alerts have historically only been communicated in English. This leaves tens of thousands of people in Omaha in the dark about what is happening and what precautions to take. We now have a text and email alert system for community leaders who represent 31 ethnic communities and speak 26 languages.
- **We need YOUR help** recruiting more community leaders! We are missing community leaders from 21 ethnic groups. If you or someone you know is a leader in one of the following communities, please sign up for alerts on our website: [www.rdomaha.org/alerts/](http://www.rdomaha.org/alerts/)
  - ZERO community representation for the following ethnic groups: Belizean, Bhutanese, Cameroonian, Chadian, Chin, Chinese, Columbian, El Salvadorean, Eritrean, Guatemalan, Honduran, Indian, Iranian, Kachin, Kenyan, Nigerian, Pakistani, Rohingya, Russian, Turkish, Venezuelan
  - Inadequate (only one person) community representation for the following ethnic groups: Burundian, Liberian, Nepali, Ukrainian, Egyptian

### Window A/C Program

- **33 window air conditioning units** were given to 23 families who did not have access to cool air during the summer. This impacted the lives of 115 people, including 55 children!

### Housing Advocacy

- We received **22 housing advocacy** referrals in 2023, which led to an impact of 110 former refugees getting assistance for housing issues.
- Restoring Dignity continues our proud history of **supporting housing justice bills** and wrote letters of support for the following in 2023: LB270, LB187, LB248, LB182, and LB175.

### Community Vaccination Clinics

- Restoring Dignity continued our partnerships with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services and Douglas County Health Department and hosted **seven mobile COVID-19 and flu vaccination clinics** with on-site interpreters! Altogether, **35 Covid vaccines and 207 flu vaccines** were administered to members of Omaha's refugee communities. We worked hand-in-hand with leaders from the following organizations to make these clinics possible: *East African Development Association of Nebraska, Omaha Center for Refugees and Immigrants, Nebraska Afghan Community Center, Omaha Knyaw (Karen) Baptist Church, and the Karenni Catholic Community of Nebraska.*

### Refugee Housing Planning Study

- We received a grant from Front Porch Investments to conduct Omaha's first-ever **refugee housing planning study**. There are many people who want to invest in Omaha's refugee communities via housing but want guidance as to what would be most effective. We hired **Wilder Research**, a well-established research firm from Minneapolis, to conduct the study. This study aims to provide a road map forward for Omaha's philanthropic community, housing developers, and refugee-serving agencies. The study officially started in 2023 and will wrap up mid-2024.

### Move to Yates

- In September 2023, **we moved our office to the beautiful Yates Illuminates building** at 3260 Davenport Street. We are housed in this newly renovated space with 12 other dynamic agencies, many of whom have a focus on serving the refugee and immigrant communities.

### Welcome Home Gala

- In April 2023, we hosted our first-ever **Welcome Home Gala** at the Yates Illuminates

building! We welcomed 130 incredible guests who enjoyed a taste of the world from seven refugee and immigrant-owned restaurants. Performers from a variety of communities showcased their incredible gifts and talents. It was truly a **night of joy**, as we came together to celebrate eleven years of Restoring Dignity's impact within Omaha's refugee communities!

### Home Makeovers

- In April 2023, we completed a **home makeover for a Karen family of ten**. The father had recently gone blind from a virus, leaving his wife as the sole provider for their eight children. The Omaha community generously donated furniture and household items and gave \$5,607.40 in financial donations to the family. *With this money, their mortgage was able to be paid for four months!* Volunteers gave their time and energy, and the family's house was completely furnished in one day. The **house turned out beautiful**, and the family was incredibly thankful for the support they received! A generous supporter continued to drop off groceries for the family for nine months!
- In November 2023, **we served a Karen family of five**. The mother had fled a dangerous and abusive relationship with her four children and was starting her life over. Everyone was sleeping on the floor, and there was virtually no furniture in their home. The generous Omaha community purchased every item the family requested on Amazon AND *donated \$5,065.15 towards rent assistance (which covered their rent for SIX months)!* Volunteers worked tirelessly the entire day, and the **end result was a beautiful, furnished apartment** that the family absolutely adored! After the home makeover, a local physical therapy office reached out and purchased Christmas gifts for the family!

### Emergency Situations

- Every year, **emergency situations** come to our attention, and we rise to meet the need as much as possible. In 2023, there was a family of eight who came from Eritrea. One of the daughters was wheelchair-bound, and the home they were renting did not have a ramp, so **she was unable to go to school**. We asked the generous Omaha community to respond and immediately received a ramp donation. Soon afterward, a contractor volunteered to install the ramp. Our generous supporters continued to donate funds to the family and *\$904.90 was raised towards the family's rent!*
- A South Sudanese mother who experienced a **horrific car crash** that left her wheelchair-bound was unable to provide Christmas gifts to her five children. **We asked the Omaha community to help**, and within FIVE MINUTES of posting on social media, a generous donor reached out and **purchased gifts for the entire family!**

## Volunteers

- **Volunteers continue to be instrumental** to our ability to serve refugee families each year! In 2023, **over 530 volunteers served at Restoring Dignity for a total of almost 5,000 hours**. Every time a volunteer walks in the door of our office or arrives at an event, they bring fresh energy to the team. We are forever grateful for the many, many hands that made our work lighter this year!
  - At our **Welcome Home gala**, 38 incredible volunteers showed up with smiles on their faces to help us decorate, set up, serve food, serve drinks, greet guests and clean up. We truly could not have pulled off that amazing event without their help!
  - Over 100 volunteers donated their time at each **home makeover** to deep clean, move, and decorate family homes. At our home makeover in November, volunteers assembled 23 pieces of furniture in less than 4 hours! When it was time to move out of the furniture bank and into our new office at Yates, volunteers helped pack all of our supplies, load everything into a moving truck, and unload and set up at Yates. Thanks to our volunteers, we were able to move and set up everything in one day so that our staff could get right back to work serving Omaha's refugee families the very next day.
  - Many of the volunteers who helped at these events also serve as **consistent volunteers**. Every week in 2023, our consistent volunteers arrived to sort and clean donations at the furniture bank, shop with families, and pack their belongings. Volunteers provided crucial support to our Welcome Home program by packing supplies and preparing class materials. The number of items volunteers laminated in 2023 is much too high to count, but we are **grateful for every single one!**
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## Total Served

Altogether, **Restoring Dignity served 4,882 people in 2023 via one-to-one interactions** (ie. in-home classes, a/c installation, home-makeovers, furniture shopping and delivery, housing advocacy and mobile clinics). Of these, 2,277 were children. We are not able to include the number of lives impacted by the Emergency Alert Network because it is not directly measurable, but we estimate that number to be in the thousands.

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## Getting Involved in 2024

There are **many incredible ways** to serve Omaha's refugee communities! In your envelope, you will find a handout with **three core opportunities** to get involved this year. Please consider choosing one (or more!) ways to participate in 2024. We are truly only able to serve Omaha's refugee communities because of **YOUR continued support!** THANK YOU!

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At the heart of *Restoring Dignity* is our **belief** that something can and should be done to meet the needs of Omaha's refugee community through empowerment, education, and advocacy partnerships. **Thank you for continuing to support Restoring Dignity and the families we serve!**

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Hannah A. Vlach".

*Hannah Vlach*

*Founder and Executive Director*

*Restoring Dignity*

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