



ROMERO HOUSE
ANNUAL REPORT
2019 / 2020

Jenn McIntyre, Romero House Director



A VIEW FROM QUARANTINE

This fiscal year ended with the uncertainty that has been felt by the whole world. As part of the collective effort to stop the spread of COVID-19, we shut the doors of our office. Our team has shifted to working largely from home, and each of our four houses has been socially isolated from the others, as we concentrate on facilitating communities of care, learning and positivity in our little pods. Our support of refugees through the walk-in program has moved online, as the workers connect with people all over the city via phone and email. It has taken some major adjustments, but our team has responded with great flexibility and creativity.

This annual report will focus on the 2019-2020 fiscal year, which was pre-COVID until the final two weeks. We reflect with longing on a year full of in-person gatherings and face-to-face connections. We move forward in a spirit of solidarity and support for all of the refugees who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic.



Climate Justice

From co-hosting a Green New Deal town hall to participating in last year's historic Climate March, we are actively engaged in conversations about the future of the planet. We know that climate change is adversely affecting the oceans, species habitat and human communities, already forcing huge numbers of people to migrate.

Within Romero House, we have also taken a look at our own practices, starting with immediate steps we can take that put us on a path to a more sustainable way of living. This includes trying to eliminate the use of disposable dishes, decreasing vehicle dependence, and planting a pollinator garden at Dorval House.



ROMERO HOUSE CAMP

Romero family camp is always the highlight of our year and this August camp was no exception. We took a total of 44 people up to Espanola, where we were warmly welcomed by our long-time hosts at the Anishinabe Spiritual Centre for an unforgettable week of fun.

The 8 families who participated were introduced to the great outdoors of Ontario. Activities included swimming, fishing, art and crafts, hiking, canoeing and campfire

songs. It was a meaningful time of deepening community and giving the families an opportunity to find some peace in nature outside of the city.



THE BIGGER PICTURE

64,050 ↑

Total Refugee Claims
made inside Canada

APR 1, 2019 > MAR 31, 2020

Canada saw an increase of 8,000+ refugee claims made over the past year's 55,820 claims. Settlement agencies, government departments and social service agencies across the country sought to adjust their services to accommodate this rising number of people in need of support.

New Legislation THAT LIMITS ACCESS TO THE REFUGEE PROCESS

The federal government's *Budget Implementation Act 2019* contained some devastating provisions for refugee claimants, including limiting access to Canada's refugee determination system for people who have already initiated asylum claims in the United States. Given that the protections for refugees in the US are substantially inferior to Canada, we have been standing in opposition to this legislative change. We are also directly supporting many people who have now been determined ineligible to make a refugee claim due to this legislation.



Snapshot of
ROMERO HOUSE FAMILIES

APR 2019 ~ MAR 2020

Country of Origin No. of Families

COLOMBIA	7
DOMINICAN R.	1
EGYPT	1
ERITREA	1
GHANA	1
IRAN	1
IRAQ	1
MEXICO	2
PAKISTAN	1

Total No. of Families 16

Family Composition No. of Families Adults Kids

SINGLE PARENT	4	4	10
TWO PARENTS	10	20	19
MULTI-ADULT (NO KIDS)	2	5	0
TOTAL	16	29	29

Immigration Decisions 2018-19 No. of Families

POSITIVE DECISIONS *	6
NEGATIVE DECISIONS	2
PERMANENT RESIDENCE GRANTED	2
CITIZENSHIP GRANTED	2

Immigration Decisions 2019-20 includes current and former residents of Romero House

* Includes refugee claims, Humanitarian and Compassionate applications, Pre-Removal Risk Assessment applications

Romero House Workers supported close to 600 individuals and families this past year through our **Walk-in Program** at the **Bloor Street Centre**

Walk-in Program Services included: orientation to the refugee system, referrals to legal aid and lawyers, access to housing, employment, education and income supports, interpretation support, work permit applications and access to our clothing boutique. In addition to providing essential services, this frontline work keeps us keenly aware of the ways in which legislation and systems affect refugee families, enabling us to do effective advocacy work.

Finding Sustainable Housing

Eight families moved on from Romero’s housing units to permanent apartments or houses in the past year. Our workers supported them in arduous housing searches as well as in securing the support they needed to start a new home. This included accessing moving support funds through social assistance, funding deliveries from the Furniture



Bank and loading up our truck time and time again with piles of boxes and furniture. Our last month’s rent fund ensured they could meet the demands of landlords to secure housing. We wish all of these families well as they settle in to their new homes and neighbourhoods and look forward to continuing our relationships of mutual support.

Safe Third Country Legal Challenge

A team of talented lawyers led the legal challenge to the *Safe Third Country Agreement* in November on behalf of the Canadian Council of Churches, Amnesty International and the Canadian Council for Refugees. Our Director and Founder participated in a delegation to the US-Mexico border and saw first-hand the human rights abuses committed against refugees and migrants. With the United States not living up to its international obligations to protect refugees, being party to this agreement means Canada is closing the door to most refugees who arrive at the US-Canada



border. While we await the court’s decision, Romero House continues to advocate that our government suspend the agreement.

Contesting Provincial Cuts

Romero House advocacy was in full swing as we fought against a number of provincial cuts that disproportionately affected refugees in Ontario. Devastating cuts to legal aid threatened fundamental access to justice and protection for refugee claimants. We are grateful the federal government stepped in in the short term, but we must continue to advocate to all levels of government

that there be sustainable legal aid funding for refugees. We also participated in province-wide advocacy against cuts to the Transition Child Benefit, which would have seen refugee families lose crucial financial support for their children. Thanks to the efforts of collective action, the province walked back these cuts at the last minute.

The Romero House Team

The work and life of Romero House is sustained by hundreds of community members who give of their time and talent. A special thank you to the volunteers who sort donations, teach English, translate documents, serve as receptionists, help out with kid's club and so much more.

Some of our most committed volunteers are the Romero House board members, who give so much of themselves. Thank you to **Jack Costello**, our outgoing Acting President, who stepped in when called upon to lead. And a big welcome to **Lori Neale**, who came on as the new President in September. As a long-time Romero House community member, we know we are in good hands.

A big shout out to the **Romero House Workers*** who generously offer one or two years of their lives to live in our houses and accompany families. This year we have been blessed with the energy and service of Anika Reynar, Claire Kingston, Joel Derksen, Robbie Arzumanov, Sayan Das and Sydney Shadbolt.

* You will note a change in name from **intern** to **worker**. We believe this new title, which comes to us from a prayer that we recite together daily, does justice to the responsibility that the workers carry at Romero House.

Jack Costello At Romero Camp

We are also thankful to our wonderful staff who keep our engine running with quiet competence. **Tembeka Ndlovu**, our Assistant Director, has led us confidently through administrative staff transition and the navigation of our important relationship with the City of Toronto. Our bookkeeper **Ann Khatter** has spent the year becoming well acquainted with the Romero House books, paying attention to every small detail. We are excited that she has come on board as a permanent employee.



We offer our thanks and very best wishes to two departing staff. **Alexandra Jimenez**, outgoing Administration and Finance Manager, has worked at Romero House for 17 years. Her competence and her lively personality will be sorely missed. We also say goodbye to **You Sung Chae** who has been at Romero House for four years first as a worker and then as our Administration and Programs Assistant.

Mary Jo Leddy, one of our Founders, has provided ongoing wisdom, spiritual support and tireless advocacy as she continues to live in Wanda House after almost 30 years. She has travelled to and fro across the country this year giving talks to dozens of groups about what she has learned in living as a neighbour to refugees. Her work upholds and guides the vision of Romero House.

Re-Opening During COVID

We have been able to adjust much of our service delivery model to ensure safe physical distancing during COVID. However, we know these changes have created barriers for many trying to access our services—whether it be because of technology, language barriers or need for in-kind services such as our boutique. We are planning for a safe and limited re-opening of our Bloor Street Centre in the coming months.



To do this, we are developing a suite of protocols for risk mitigation and pursuing various funding sources to support safe and modified forms of in-person interaction. We are also monitoring the needs of refugees, who have been disproportionately affected by this pandemic, to ensure that we are directing our time and resources in the most helpful way.

Dorval Garden

The garden behind and around Dorval House looks better than it ever has. Quarantine has allowed us the time to put a lot of work into it and we are blessed by Anika's urban farming experience and skills. We are anticipating a bountiful harvest, aided by the birds, bees and butterflies that are visiting our newly planted pollinator garden. Our local veggies will supplement the weekly food hampers going out to current and former residents. In addition to supporting food security, the Dorval garden has become a much-valued space of safe and distanced interaction in a time when it has been difficult to know how to "do community."





We cannot do everything,
and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,
a step along the way, an opportunity
for the Lord's grace to enter
and do the rest.

~ *Óscar Arnulfo Romero*

