

Adventist Community Services Links with Nonprofit to Help Amid Migrant Crisis

The images of migrants being bused to New York City, Washington, D.C., and other states have occupied the news for almost a year. While local municipalities grapple with whether or not to welcome these newcomers, the Greater New York Conference Adventist Community Services (GNYC ACS) has teamed up with a local nonprofit to help.

GNYC ACS and Team TLC NYC, a subset of national nonprofit Grannies Respond Inc., have launched the Little Shop of Kindness at the former Adventist Book Center near Manhattan's Bryant Park.

The repurposed site is now a welcome center for migrants and asylum seekers who have recently arrived in the city. Bookshelves now hold clothes and shoes for individuals and families to sort through.



Members of the Greater New York Conference Adventist Community Services and Team TLC NYC coordinators pose for a photo. Standing from left are Irma Davidson, Rick Perez, Jeanette Blanca, Ilze Thielmann, and Everette Samuel. Seated from left are, Dale Paperno and Arleen Stern.

“It’s a perfect fit,” said Everette Samuel, GNYC ACS director, of the collaboration, adding that the two entities have similar goals and

complementary strengths. “We can pool our resources to reach more people.”

Team TLC NYC was a small group of volunteers greeting migrants arriving at Port Authority for a few years. “Whatever people need, we try to provide,” said Ilze Thielmann, Team TLC NYC’s director.

Last summer, a network of similar volunteers alerted them of a plan to bus migrants from Texas to New York City, Thielmann said. As the frequency and number of migrants picked up, the team scrambled to help as many as they could.

“People were showing up with no sponsors, nowhere to go,” she said. “They were completely vulnerable; they didn’t speak the language, they had no money . . . they needed every service available.”

Thielmann and her network of volunteers and advocates pitched in, using their own money to buy snacks, toiletries, medicine, Uber rides, and plane and bus tickets for migrants.

In late 2022, an Advent Hope church member contacted Team TLC NYC about hosting a fundraiser for the group. Thielmann was introduced to Samuel, and the seeds of partnership were planted.

Meanwhile, the nonprofit struggled to find a space to house supplies and clothing. The Port Authority had allocated a space, but as the bus arrivals dwindled early this year, the group was told to move out in March. “They told us, ‘This is a bus terminal, not a store,’” Thielmann said.

After various church sites fell through, Thielmann



Newly-arriving immigrants receive needed items and services.

put out a desperate call to Samuel, who knew just the place—the former Adventist Book Center. When Thielmann toured the location, she cried, “I couldn’t believe it’d be available to us!” It opened four weeks later, on March 28.

The center, open five days a week, serves between 60 to 100 people daily, Thielmann said. When migrants show up, a security guard greets them and checks to make sure they’re in the right place. Volunteers conduct a brief intake process and have refreshments while waiting to “shop” (items are free) or to be seen by the visiting agencies who can sign them up for health care, state identification, and legal services.

Volunteers also sort donations and serve as personal shoppers helping new arrivals navigate the shop, picking items such as undergarments, shoes, and children’s clothing. There’s even a makeshift dressing room. “It’s a place for people to be treated with dignity,” Thielmann said.

The center relies on donations, with volunteers continuing to use their own funds to help with operations. Private donations, grants, and advisory funds have helped to alleviate some of the financial pressure. But with bus arrivals picking up creating a persistent need, funding remains a concern.

Samuel says the partnership works because they both bring something to the table—Team TLC NYC provides volunteers, structure, and a network, while GNYC ACS offers

volunteers, storage space, transportation, and more.

“If they don’t get the spiritual component, something is lacking,” Samuel said. And that’s not just for the migrants. They can minister to volunteers too. “As they serve, they need to be replenished. Some of them are migrants themselves, and are familiar with the struggle. I [am available] . . . [so they] know they have a safe space.”

The need for spiritual care is apparent. From volunteers asking Samuel to pray with them to parents’ faces lighting up when she brought in a handful of Spanish children’s Bibles one day. “They kept asking me about ‘church, church,’” she recalled.

More than 70,000 migrants have come to New York City in recent months, with the city scrambling to accommodate 42,000 that are in the city’s care, according to recent comments from Mayor Eric Adams. He estimates it’ll cost the city \$4 billion by next year.

Both Thielmann and Samuel say they hope the center is a welcoming place where migrants feel comfortable and are treated compassionately. “Kindness is universal,” Samuel said. “We usually wait for people to come to us. It’s an opportunity to meet all kinds of people who may have never heard of [the Seventh-day Adventist Church].”

—Kaara Baptiste, freelance writer, Greater New York Conference

