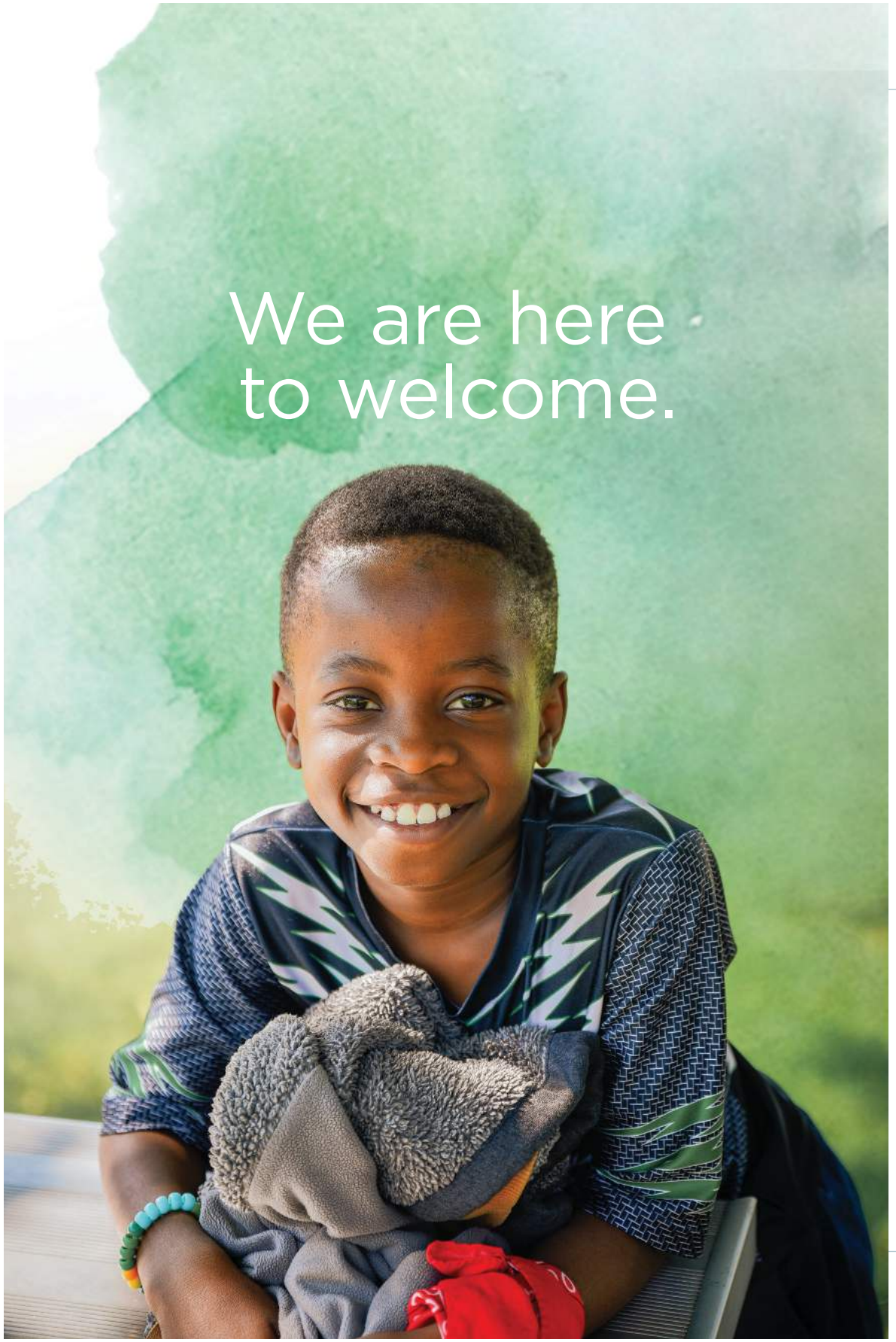
world relief
CHICAGOLAND

2024 GRATITUDE REPORT

# WELCOME *Home*

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# Letter of Welcome

*from the Executive Director*

Welcome to the 2024 Gratitude Report! **In 2024, World Relief Chicagoland celebrated 45 years of welcome to refugees and other immigrants.** The legacy of these years is filled with stories of God's faithfulness and an incredible community of churches, organizations, and volunteers coming together in welcome. In 2024, you helped to build a community of support and safety for over 10,700 refugees and other immigrants! I'm writing to you today with a deep sense of **gratitude and awe** for what you have helped to create.

2024 reflects a year in which a record number of refugees and other immigrants received care, compassion and support. It is also true; we do not know what the future will hold for refugee resettlement and how many people our country will welcome in the future. **But our call and commitment remains: to build communities of welcome where all our newest neighbors can grow and thrive, and to do so in partnership with local churches and our broader communities.** You have been a part of this vital work this past year, and in the pages to follow you'll see a glimpse of the incredible impact you have made.

From all walks of life and many diverse backgrounds, you have come together and said, **"We are here to welcome."** You have helped to set-up apartments and provide furniture and Welcome Kits for those who arrived through O'Hare airport all year long. You helped to create safe spaces where English classes could be taught and where Immigration Legal Services could provide work authorization clinics and citizenship clinics. Children were enrolled in school and gained social and emotional support in after-school clubs, all because of you. You enabled over 1,200 volunteers to serve in countless ways, meeting with families or helping in the office. **I could go on and on about the impact you have had!**

What follows in the pages to come is a report of gratitude. Thank you for helping to create change that has lasted for over 45 years with us. **Thank you for believing that our communities are better when all are welcome and given a chance to thrive.** Thank you for impacting the lives of so many. We look forward to continued partnership for the next 45!

Serving Together,

**Susan Sperry**
*Executive Director*
*World Relief Chicagoland*

# 45 Years of Partnership

*Wheaton Bible Church*

**“Wheaton Bible Church, you are sent…”**

These words resonate through the pews at the end of each service at Wheaton Bible Church in West Chicago, IL. They echo the powerful commands from 2 Corinthians 5 and Jesus’ words in John 20:21: “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you!” This message serves as a profound reminder to the congregation of their mission.

Pastor Kyle Reschke reflects on this calling, saying, “People might label us a missional or ‘sent church’ because of our many missionaries and partners. **However, we believe a truly missional church is one where every individual embraces their role as someone who is sent.”**

Several years ago, the leadership at Wheaton Bible Church began to explore what it truly means to be a sending church, where every individual who walks through the doors is sent out. Founded 95 years ago in the heart of downtown Wheaton, IL, Wheaton Bible Church had a strong focus on global missions from the very beginning, supporting 18 missionaries even before having a pastor or a building! Over the years, their passion for global missions remained steadfast, and they expanded their efforts to include local missions and organizations. When World Relief Chicagoland was established in 1979, Wheaton Bible Church was there from the start.

Despite their strong commitment to missions, the leadership at Wheaton Bible recognized the need to be more present in their own neighborhood. Pastor Kyle reflects, “We heard the statement that churches often celebrate their seating capacity rather than their sending capacity. That statement stuck with us and challenged us.”

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Wheaton Bible Church operated the International Friendship Ministry, led by parishioners Bill and Betty Thompson. A key aspect of this ministry was the biannual international dinners, which welcomed many from World Relief’s local English language classes. These gatherings provided opportunities for fellowship, community building, and enjoying great food together. From this group, people began to serve as volunteers at World Relief as Friendship Partnership and English tutors.

Wheaton Bible Church then began hosting English language classes at their downtown Wheaton campus in collaboration with World Relief Chicagoland. During this period, a Hispanic Bible study was established, which gradually grew into a Spanish-speaking congregation sharing the church building. A decade later, Wheaton Bible Church decided to relocate from downtown Wheaton to West Chicago, **embracing their mission to be a sending church.**

**When Wheaton Bible Church relocated from Wheaton, they realized their impact within the new community was minimal.** Embracing this challenge, they listened and adapted to their new neighborhood, which was 55% Hispanic. Upon settling in, Wheaton Bible adopted a new mission statement and set of values to guide their community engagement. They envisioned “one body, two arms,” emphasizing unity between the English- and Spanish-speaking congregations. This vision eventually led to a merged eldership and shared budget, deepening their mutual commitment.

The church launched Puente de Pueblo, a joint outreach initiative with the Latino community in West Chicago. With initial support and training from World Relief Chicagoland staff, they offered En-

glish language classes and case management for immigrants and refugees. Today, Puente de Pueblo is the largest social service agency in West Chicago, providing after-school programs, English language classes, case management, and receiving 14,000 hours of volunteer support annually from parishioners.

**Over the years, Wheaton Bible Church transformed from a predominantly white, globally focused missional church to a diverse congregation reflecting the community.** Both congregations flourished, with the Spanish-speaking congregation, now called Iglesia del Pueblo, attracting over 1,200 attendees at their Easter service.

In October 2021, when the senior pastor of over 30 years retired, the church appointed Pastor Hanibal Rodriguez, the pastor of the Spanish congregation, to lead both congregations.

"It's a beautiful thing what has happened along the way. By itself, Iglesia would be a thriving church on its own. And while many churches based on ethnic groupings often start and then split, those splits are not usually pretty. We firmly believe we are better together. **We are one in Christ, not a Spanish church and an English church, but ONE church,"** says Pastor Kyle.

Over the years, Wheaton Bible Church sought to define what it means to be a church in a new place and neighborhood. Damon Schroeder, World Relief's Church Mobilization Director for all U.S. Offices and a former Church Mobilizer in Chicagoland, observed: "In my observation over 25 years, Wheaton Bible Church has successfully made three major shifts:

- From global missions only to "glocal" missions
- From internally to externally focused
- From a Spanish church plant to "one body, two arms"

We deeply appreciate WBC's partnership, admire their humility, and celebrate their leadership among churches across the region."

World Relief Chicagoland is grateful for the 45 years of partnership with Wheaton Bible Church, and we praise our Father in heaven for the **incredible impact** that has been made in the community together!

# The *Impact* You Made

Church Partnerships +
Volunteer Engagement

**371**
CHURCHES **CONNECTED** AND **SEEKING TO PARTNER**

**318**
HOMES SET UP

**$1.5m+**
TOTAL AMOUNT OF IN-KIND DONATIONS

**160**
CHURCHES **ACTIVELY** IN PARTNERSHIP

**30,000**
**HOURS OF TIME** VOLUNTEERED
***EQUAL TO $235,852 OF HOURS SERVED***

**1,200**
TOTAL **VOLUNTEERS**

**27,317**
MILES DRIVEN BY VOLUNTEERS

# Volunteer Highlights

*Celebrating the Heartbeat of the Community*

## GLEN & LAURINDA MEISNER

AURORA

We are grateful for Glen and Laurinda, who serve as **Friendship Partners** and assist with the **Homework Club**, focusing on transportation support. They have been connected with the refugee and immigrant community for almost twenty years, first meeting families through school events and English as a Learning Language picnics. Through dinners, spicy food, and friendships, they've built strong, meaningful relationships.

When asked what they find most fulfilling, Glen shared, "Just meeting the people and getting to know them. They are precious. I underestimated at first how amazing they are—the way they adapt to a completely foreign culture is inspiring." Laurinda added, "God's heart is for the marginalized, the foreigner. **I love helping them feel as at home as possible."**

When asked why they would encourage others to get involved, Glen reflected, "This is the Father's heart. If He is for them, then we should be too." Laurinda shared, "Some of them have been through so much—loss of family, loss of everything. If we can be here to welcome them, that's so important." Glen added, **"Most didn't choose this; it was thrust upon them. But in a way, we can choose them."**

## JOY HOVING

DUPAGE

Joy Hoving, a volunteer for the DuPage office, leads a **monthly cooking group providing first meals for incoming refugee families.** Joy first learned about refugee support opportunities at a women's conference, where the speaker from Women of Welcome shared, "If every church in America sponsored one immigrant family, what a difference that could make!" Inspired by this vision, Joy explored ways her church could help. After connecting with World Relief Chicagoland, she felt encouraged by the strong volunteer support and saw it as a perfect partnership.

In June, a World Relief Chicagoland staff member visited Joy's church, sharing volunteer needs. "He mentioned cooking meals for new arrivals, and I thought, 'That sounds like something our church would be great at!'" Now, Joy coordinates a growing team of five women who meet monthly at their church to prepare meals for incoming families. Joy says that "it's created community within my church and is super helpful to refugee families." They follow World Relief-provided recipes, packaging each meal with water and banana bread for distribution.

Joy shares, "I haven't been doing this long, but **I love how well it fits with my gifting—organization is my superpower!"** Although her role is more behind-the-scenes, Joy values the community formed within her church through this work.

**SARAH CONNOR**
CHICAGO

Sarah serves from the Chicago office as a **Transportation Volunteer**, **assisting with transportation needs for refugee families.** Recently retired, Sarah was looking to get involved in refugee resettlement, bringing years of experience working with people from other countries. She has an extensive background in global affairs, having managed programs at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and served as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Czech Republic and Central Mongolia.

When asked why she chose to volunteer, Sarah shared, "I wanted a flexible way to help, and driving is the greatest need right now. I think it's important to live out values that strengthen our community." Sarah's dedication reflects her belief in the importance of welcoming refugees. "I've been so impressed with the people I've met – **they are committed to this community and committed to building a life for themselves and their children.** We need to lead and give back."

Sarah encourages others to consider volunteering. **"If you want to better our community, then volunteer.** Driving might not be the first thing that comes to mind, but it's a meaningful way to connect with people from diverse cultures and make a difference."

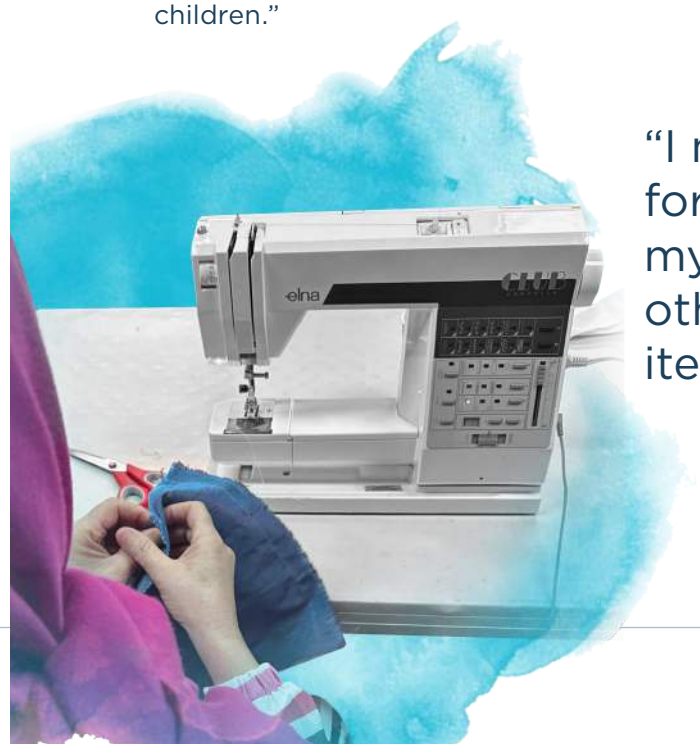


# Sewing & Group Connection

*The Story of Amira*

Amira* arrived in Chicagoland with a sense of great relief after she and her family fled Afghanistan. "When we first arrived in the U.S., I felt very good and happy. I was so relieved to have made it to the U.S. because **we left the war in our country, and we are safe here."** However, after the initial relief of arriving safely, Amira began to feel isolated and alone in her new city. "It was so hard for me at first; it was very difficult. I kept thinking, 'How will I speak with people? I could never do that.' **In the beginning, I couldn't even write my name or speak; I didn't know anything."**

Through the support of donors and community partners, Amira received a sewing machine and joined an Afghan women's group that focused on cultural orientation, English language learning, and basic sewing skills. The group met at a local church partner. The sewing machine became a lifeline for Amira as her husband worked and her children were enrolled in school. "I did something for myself at home. I made clothes for myself and my children, and other household items, but mostly I sewed clothes for my children."




"I made clothes for myself and my children, and other household items..."

The Afghan women's group provided Amira with the safe space she needed for **connection and learning, which helped kindle her confidence, find community, and spark her creativity.** Amira shared, "It helped a lot! The class encouraged me to work harder. Before that, I was always thinking and stressed at home. I didn't have the courage—I was afraid to talk to people and to go outside. I always thought I would never learn, that I would never understand. I was so discouraged. After I attended the class and saw my classmates, it helped me so much! I learned a lot of things, and it gave me more courage to keep learning! I can learn! I can understand my address and my name! It was helpful to practice speaking English with church volunteers. At home, we were isolated and didn't have anyone to speak English with."

World Relief staff member, Shola Yawari reflects, "When I first met Amira, she didn't have confidence. She was nervous and very shy; she wouldn't talk. Since joining the group, she started to share, and now, whenever she knows the answer, she speaks up. She even proudly wrote her name on the board in her beautiful handwriting. She was so happy and full of joy in the group! As her teacher, I noticed her eagerness to learn and show me how much she had learned. If I taught the class how to sew pillowcases, Amira would go home, add something extra to the pillowcase, and come back the next day to ask me, 'Is it okay? Is this good?' **She would work and create something new all by herself.** From the fabric donated to World Relief, Amira sewed beautiful dresses for her children. She also helped other Afghan women alter their clothes. She made new friends in the class. **Amira is a very smart, creative, and ambitious woman."**

Because of your support, Amira is no longer isolated and alone. She has a community of women that have broken through the isolation – some like her with a similar story and **some who grew up in the U.S. that are now her friends and neighbors.** Thank you for being a part of her journey and creating lasting change in her life.

**Name changed for protection*

# 13 Years of Separation

*Now Welcomed Home*

After coming to the United States as a refugee, Hodan communicated with her family **only through phone calls and WhatsApp for 13 years.** Her mother, Safia, and her sisters, Seynab and Yagsir, were 8,000 miles away in eastern Ethiopia. In September 2024, their long separation finally ended. Thanks to your partnership with World Relief Chicagoland's Immigration Legal Services team, Safia, Seynab, and Yagsir were able to join their sister and start a new chapter of life. Here is more about their story and **how your support made a difference.**

The family's journey began in the 1990s when Somalia's civil war scattered hundreds of thousands of people across the region. Hodan ended up in a different refugee camp from her mom and sisters and didn't know where they were. She resettled to Kansas City in 2011 and eventually tracked them down through someone who had lived in the same camp as them. After reconnecting, Hodan began the family reunification process through World Relief Nashville. **While building a life in the U.S., she never gave up on reuniting with her loved ones.** She married, moved to Louisville, then to Chicago, and began raising four children, but always held on to the hope of bringing her family back together.

Meanwhile, her mom and sisters **endured years in refugee camps** and, later, as urban refugees in the city of Jijiga. The possibility of resettling in the U.S. was a lifeline for them, as the region remained gripped by hardship. Conflicts continued in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, with famines and floods displacing another million Somalis in 2023 alone. (source: UNHCR)

**Throughout this time, the program Hodan used to apply for their resettlement also faced repeated setbacks.** Their case was denied, frozen, or delayed due to various policies, including the 2016 "Muslim Ban" that temporarily halted refugee resettlement from several Muslim-majority countries. Hodan's family traveled at least seven times within Ethiopia to attend interviews and undergo DNA testing, sometimes enduring 12-hour bus rides to the capital city. Back in the U.S., Hodan and her husband received updates about the case from staff at World Relief Chicagoland, who tracked its progress and mediated with the State Department.

"There were many times we lost hope and forgot about the process," said Yagsir. "So when we finally got the news about our flight [to the U.S.], it was a surprise. I remember IOM called us around 10 a.m. that day, telling us we would go to a hotel in Addis for two weeks, do orientations and health screenings, and then fly to the U.S. **It felt like a dream. We were happy, but it was hard to say goodbye to our friends and family."**

Today, Safia, Seynab, and Yagsir are adjusting to their new season and learning to navigate life in Chicago. They've moved into an apartment, received vital documents, and are getting employment and language support.  Though they carry the weight of their past experiences and the road ahead is long, your partnership has helped begin to heal the wounds of their long separation and laid the foundation for lasting change. **Thank you for being a part of ending over 13 years of separation for this family!**

# *Your Impact* of Welcome

Through Immigrant Family Services

**240** PARTICIPANTS IN GROUP THERAPY

**55** JOB TRAINING SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

**130** CAR SEATS GIVEN

**11** CARS DONATED TO REFUGEES

**604** PEOPLE STARTING THEIR FIRST JOB IN THE U.S.

**1,509** KIDS SERVED

**1,111** MEDICAL SCREENINGS

**416** KIDS ENROLLED IN SCHOOL

**130** HEALTH ORIENTATIONS

**350** BACKPACKS + SCHOOL SUPPLIES-DISTRIBUTED

**1,227** REFUGEES RESETTLED

**7,745** PEOPLE SERVED

# *Your Impact* of Welcome

Through English Language Learning

**104,730**
HOURS OF ESL CLASSES

**53%** ENGLISH LANGUAGE GAINS

***STATE AVERAGE 39%***

**1,376** TOTAL SERVED

## Flying to New Heights

*Ihosef's Story*

**When Ihosef was a boy, he dreamed of airplanes.** His mother Yolette worked as a legal consultant at an airport, and on the days when he came to work with her, the planes amazed him.

"I was always good at taking things apart and putting them back together," says Ihosef. "Planes especially interested me. I always liked to see how versatile they were. I simply felt that aviation mechanics was for me."

**His dreams were jeopardized when they had to flee Venezuela due to conflict and economic turmoil.** After a number of years in a second country, they came to the US as refugees. Through your partnership, you walked with Ihosef and Yolette, providing support in the areas of housing, employment counseling, academic assistance, language-learning, mental health support and more.

"When I arrived, I came with severe depression. I thought I was going to die working in a factory and that I wouldn't know anything," says Yolette. "Even though I could manage the language, and I had enrolled in a course, everything looked limited for me. Now though, I feel there are many possibilities for us."

This summer, Ihosef visited Lewis University's aviation mechanics program, applied for a major scholarship, and received it!

**"We have a saying that if you can see far off, it's because good hands have boosted you," says Yolette. "I think that describes how World Relief Chicagoland has helped us."**

"What I'm most proud of is my son [got the scholarship] all himself…If you're a parent, you'll understand. I had to be dad and mom at the same time for him, now I'm seeing my dreams through my son! In my country when you finish university you get a ring. So, there is this saying that the person who has a ring has a future. **Now my son has this future, and I'm so proud."**

The journey from displacement to thriving is long and full of ups and downs. Ihosef and Yolette's story is far from over, **but your partnership is making a dream possible.** For Ihosef and hundreds of other displaced families, you are laying a foundation for change that will impact generations. **Thank you!**

# Over a Decade of Giving Faithfully

Meet the Iseman Family, **dedicated supporters of World Relief Chicagoland for over 12 years.** Hear what they had to say about their journey of giving:

"We first learned about World Relief through our experiences in the Chicagoland area. Over the years, we've met many people who have benefited from World Relief's services—Burmese classmates of our children, coworkers resettled from Iraq, and even second-generation Vietnamese friends whose parents arrived in the '70s. We also attend a church that participates in the Good Neighbor program and donates Welcome Kits to newly arrived refugee households.

Our decision to give to World Relief came as part of a year-end contribution. We began receiving emails and updates that highlighted the incredible impact the organization was making, and through those stories, we realized how important long-term support is for refugee families. The commitment required to help them transition into a new culture, language, and country really resonated with us, so we decided to contribute annually.

One of our favorite parts about partnering with World Relief is seeing the tangible effects of their work in the community. Their long-standing presence and unwavering support for families is visible throughout the region. **We feel incredibly fortunate to have such a global presence right here in our community,** and we're grateful for the way World Relief welcomes the stranger and fosters a more **diverse and globally aware Chicagoland area.**

Thank you, World Relief, for your work in making a positive impact both locally and globally!

# Foundations, Corporate, and Grant Partners

**Foundations + Corporations**
Foundation and corporate partners in Chicagoland make a pivotal difference in the lives of immigrants and refugees helping to create lasting change in the lives of thousands. Providing catalyst funding, responding generously to urgent community needs, and being a part of the day-in, day-out sustainability through yearly grants – we are deeply grateful for the foundation and corporate partners named here, as well as for those that wish to remain anonymous. They have shown their commitment to building welcoming and just communities to help families rebuild their lives.

*W.B. & H.P. White Foundation • Andrew and Alice Fischer Charitable Trust • Buckle Up For Life • Chicago Bar Foundation • Chicago Community Trust • Community Foundation of the Fox River Valley  Duly Health • DuPage Foundation • Fox Valley United Way • G-force  Glen Ellyn Infant Welfare Society • IL Bar Foundation •  United Fund Kingdom Charitable Trust • Lawyers Trust Fund of IL • MacArthur Foundation • Now Health Group • Tyndale Foundation • United Way of Metropolitan Chicago • Walder Foundation • Whole Foods*

**Public Funding**
We are grateful for the partnership to support refugees and other immigrants from these Public-Funded Grant Funders:

- Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration at the U.S. Department of State
- City of Aurora
- City of Chicago
- College of DuPage
- The County of DuPage
- DuPage County Workforce Development Division
- The County of Kane
- Illinois Community College Board
- Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights
- Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity
- Illinois Department of Human Services, Division of Family and Community Services and the Office of Welcome Centers for Refugee and Immigrant Services
- Illinois Department of Public Health
- Illinois Secretary of State
- Jewish Federation of Metro Chicago
- Milton Township
- Office of Refugee Resettlement at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- United Way of Metropolitan Chicago, Emergency Food and Shelter Program
- U.S. Department of Labor
- U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

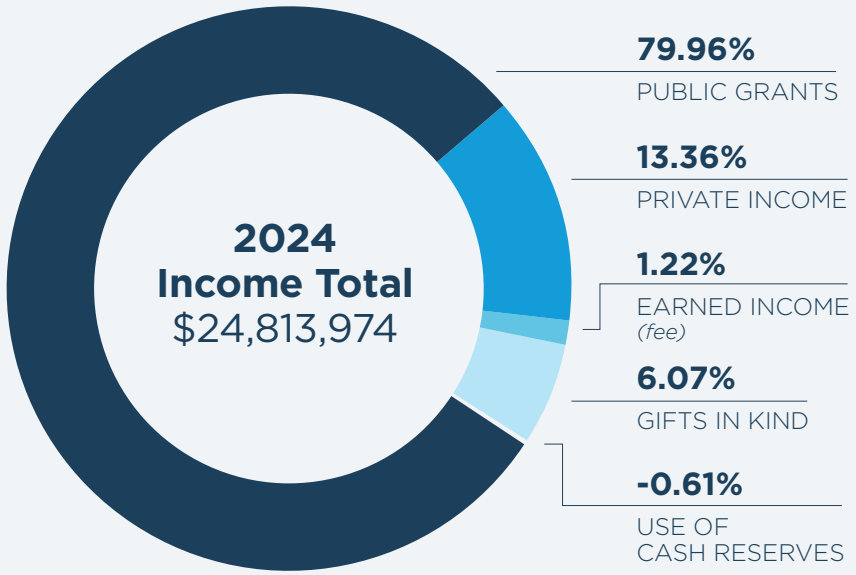
# World Relief Chicagoland Financial Statement

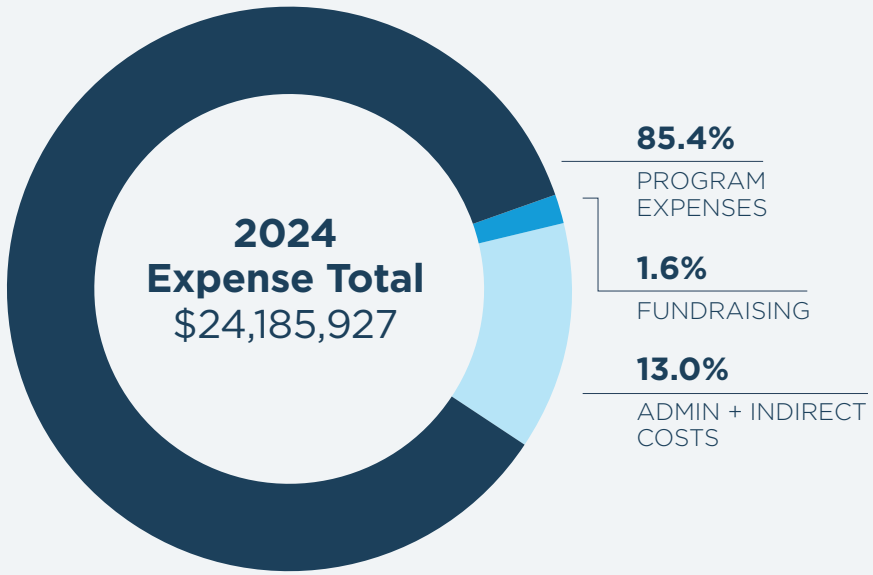
2024 Fiscal Year
(October 1, 2023 – September 30, 2024)

| INCOME | ACTUAL | BUDGET |
|---|---|---|
| Public Grants | $19,842,429 | $16,805,713 |
| Private Income | $3,315,623 | $3,096,500 |
| Earned Income | $303,553 | $464,000 |
| Use of Cash Reserves | ($153,515) | $682,502 |
| Gifts in Kind | $1,505,885 | $800,000 |
| **Income Total** | **$24,813,974** | **$21,848,715** |

| EXPENSES | ACTUAL | BUDGET |
|---|---|---|
| Salaries | $11,511,749 | $11,129,705 |
| Fringe Benefits | $2,675,511 | $2,956,208 |
| Travel | $85,194 | -- |
| Supplies | $36,538 | -- |
| Contractual | $600,218 | -- |
| Other Direct Costs | $6,193,789 | $4,874,811 |
| Indirect Costs | $2,205,052 | $2,087,922 |
| Gifts in Kind | $1,505,885 | $800,000 |
| **Expense Total** | **$24,813,974** | **$21,848,715** |

# Financial Summary






*Thank You*

for supporting refugees and immigrants in 2024!

world relief®

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