



DIAKONIA  
PROJECT

*Case Studies in Faith-based Social Service*

# Matthew House Ottawa

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## About Matthew House Ottawa

Matthew House Ottawa was founded in 2010. The organization provides services to refugee claimants, offering them a temporary place to live in Ottawa, Ontario, and access to an established support network as they start their new life in Canada. Matthew House Ottawa also operates a Furniture Bank, from which marginalized households can furnish their homes for free with gently used items donated to the organization. Matthew House Ottawa's vision is to be "a faith-based, transformative model of excellence caring for Ottawa's marginalised population." Its mission is to help this group, which includes both refugees and other vulnerable Ottawa residents, "establish connected, safe, healthy, and dignified homes within our community."<sup>1</sup>

## Matthew House Ottawa's Faith Community

Matthew House Ottawa is a Christian organization whose earliest ties were with the Baptist tradition. Matthew House Ottawa was founded by a group of volunteers who had strong connections to Bethany Baptist Church in Ottawa. The organization's first Refugee Services residence is owned by Bethany Baptist Church, which rents the house to Matthew House Ottawa at a low rate and provides additional support through food drives, volunteers, and donations. The organization, however, has grown across denominational lines and today maintains relationships with a variety of churches as well as with the broader Ottawa community.

*"I arrived in Canada as a refugee claimant. And I've benefited from the goodwill of strangers who are Christians that I didn't know—I just looked them up on the internet. I arrived and wanted to make a refugee claim, but I didn't know how or where to go. . . . They helped me with everything I needed to get started. And so afterward, I said to them, 'How can we help more people?' So they led me to Matthew House."<sup>2</sup>*

## Theological Motivation

As a Christian organization, Matthew House Ottawa is committed to following the model and teachings of Jesus as recorded in the Bible. Of particular importance for their work are Jesus's instructions that his followers show kindness and compassion to those outside their own families and communities. Matthew House Ottawa is named after Jesus's call in Matthew 25:35 to care for the stranger: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in." While Matthew House Ottawa is a Christian organization, it serves people of any faith: "We take care of anybody who comes to us for assistance, regardless of their background: their religious background, cultural background, whatever the case may be. And we want to show them the compassion and kindness that Jesus would give."<sup>3</sup>

*"Answering the call of Jesus to welcome and serve a stranger on his behalf is paramount."<sup>2</sup>*

Matthew House Ottawa is also committed to upholding the God-given dignity of each person



it encounters. The organization operates on the foundational belief that all human beings—including those who find themselves at the margins of society—bear the image of God. This means that each person deserves to be treated in a way that honours their inherent value: not only with compassion and kindness, but also with respect.

*“It’s really important for me to feel that these people I serve feel loved, they feel welcomed in a manner that gives them dignity. . . . Being a Christian, having arrived as a refugee myself, and being given a chance to serve other refugees is really a gift.”<sup>2</sup>*

## History and Goals

The first Matthew House opened in Toronto in August 1998. It was founded by Anne Woolger, who began to seek out ways to meet refugees’ unique settlement needs after a moving personal

encounter with a refugee who had been forced to flee to Canada because of persecution. With the support of local Baptist church leaders, Anne ran several summer pilot programs before the ministry opened its permanent location: a home in downtown Toronto. In the past two decades, Matthew House Toronto has grown to include four houses in the city.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

Matthew House Refugee Services Ottawa was founded in January 2010. The initiative was spearheaded by a group of volunteers, a few of whom had been involved with Matthew House Toronto and wanted to continue serving when they moved to Ottawa. For nearly a year and a half, the fledgling organization was entirely volunteer-led, with the first paid staff member hired in May 2011.

Several of Matthew House Ottawa’s founding volunteers were also involved in setting up the Furniture Bank of Ottawa. These individuals saw a need to support newcomers and other marginalized people in Ottawa who needed help setting up and settling into their new homes. The Furniture Bank was originally established as a separate organization, but it became a part of Matthew House Ottawa in 2012. In September 2020, Matthew House Ottawa opened a second location for its Refugee Services program, making space for more refugee claimants in need of short-term housing and settlement support.

*“My involvement with Matthew House started back in 2006, when I first arrived in Canada as a refugee myself. I was in the Fort Erie area, and I volunteered at the Matthew House there for a few years. Then I moved to Ottawa . . .*

*and that was at the very beginning of the refugee service. So, myself and a few other people, we got the Matthew House refugee service going. And I started volunteering at the Furniture Bank as well. So, I was working in both projects, but there came a point where we found that we needed a full-time person at the refugee service and I became that person for a while. And then I moved back to Furniture Bank and became the full-time person there. So, it's become a job for me—well, not so much a job, but more of a vocation. It's what I like doing.”<sup>3</sup>*

Today, Ontario has four Matthew Houses—in Ottawa, Toronto, Windsor, and Fort Erie—operating a combined total of eight homes as four separate charities. The Matthew House model has also been adopted by other non-profit organizations serving refugees in Hamilton, Ontario, and Vancouver, British Columbia.

## Activities and Impact

The first of Matthew House Ottawa's two major programs is Refugee Services. Individuals and families fleeing their homes because of war, persecution, discrimination, or other threats often arrive in Canada with next to nothing. Matthew House Ottawa offers these refugees short-term accommodation and meals in a family-style, home environment while helping them get on their feet in Canada. The organization operates two homes, giving it the capacity to shelter up to twenty-two refugees at a time. Its Refugee Services program has been carefully designed to preserve residents' dignity. Unlike many emergency shelters, which

focus on providing a place to sleep, Matthew House Ottawa seeks to welcome refugees into a supportive community and help them get started in all aspects of their new life: finding a job, getting settled in an apartment, learning to use the transit system, and becoming active participants in the Ottawa community. In 2019, the organization provided room, board, and settlement support to thirty-one refugee claimants.

A young man came when he was nineteen from Africa. He had never done any work—never cleaned, never worked, never even taken the bus. . . . I had to go show him, 'This is how you take the bus, this is how you identify your stop'—I took a whole week moving with this one person: teaching him how to cook, how to clean the bathroom. . . . But within one month of that person living at Matthew House, I was amazed at the change in his life. He can teach other newcomers, he can cook, he can clean; in fact, when the next person came who didn't know how to take the bus, this guy is the one who helped me show them how to take the bus. So that story really gave me hope—you can help somebody, and so quickly they can step out and help another person.<sup>2</sup>

Since Matthew House Ottawa first opened in 2010, it has provided a temporary home to more than 270 refugee claimants, both individuals and families.<sup>7</sup> Staff and volunteers keep in touch with residents even after they've moved out, following

up with them and encouraging them to continue putting down roots in Canada through milestones such as buying their own home.

*“Our work is not just giving them a home, because we do everything that comes with meeting refugee needs. They need love. They need a community to belong to. They need family, since they left their family behind. After all that, they also need to find a job . . . and to find their next home so that we can have space to welcome the next person.”<sup>2</sup>*

Matthew House Ottawa’s second program is the Furniture Bank. The program is supplied by donations of gently used pieces of furniture and other household items. Donors have the option of dropping off furniture themselves; for those who do not have a large-enough vehicle or need extra hands for loading and unloading, Matthew House Ottawa offers full-service pickup through its volunteer truck crew for a fee.

*“The Furniture Bank started just helping out newcomers to Canada, but after about a year or two, we found that there are other folks who were born in Canada who just don’t have the resources to furnish their first home. So, we opened up to everybody.”<sup>3</sup>*

The Furniture Bank helps refugees, who come to Canada with little more than the clothes on their back, get started in their new home. It also supports local residents who are getting a fresh start, such as those transitioning out of homelessness, survivors of domestic abuse, or those coming out of rehab treatment. Those who need



furniture can access Matthew House Ottawa’s services through referring partners, which include other non-profit organizations and government social-service agencies. As with Refugee Services, the Furniture Bank program is designed to honour the dignity of the clients who access the service. Matthew House Ottawa accepts only donations of high-quality items in good condition. Rather than assigning furniture to clients based on their paperwork, clients visit the Furniture Bank showroom and select their new items for themselves, giving them the dignity of choice. If clients are unable to transport items back to their

homes themselves, Matthew House Ottawa offers curbside and indoor delivery for a fee, which is paid by the client's referring partner.

In 2019, Matthew House Ottawa furnished 678 homes through the Furniture Bank, which received 6,486 pieces of furniture from donors. Matthew House Ottawa served a total of 1,962 people over the course of the year.<sup>8</sup> The Furniture Bank has a positive environmental impact as well: the program diverts twenty metric tons of good-quality furniture from landfill every month.<sup>9</sup>

*"That's what we got from the Furniture Bank. It's not just furniture, it's not just experience: you get a whole life."*<sup>9</sup>

Over the last ten years, Matthew House Ottawa has furnished the homes of around five thousand families and served more than fifteen thousand marginalized people in the Ottawa area.<sup>10</sup> Matthew House Ottawa is now offering support to another organization in Ottawa, Stepstone House, as they start a similar transitional-housing and settlement-assistance program for refugee claimants.

## Support and Budget

As a registered charity, Matthew House Ottawa's work has been made possible through the dedication and generosity of individuals, faith communities, and organizations that support its mission. The organization operates on a relatively small budget, but it has grown rapidly over the past three years. Its total revenue in 2017 was \$268,510; this increased by almost two-thirds to \$438,951 in 2019. Much of this new financial capacity has been made possible through donations, which have

increased threefold from 2017 (\$49,192) to 2019 (\$148,247)—from 18 percent to 34 percent of total income. In addition to donations, the other major source of revenue is furniture-delivery and pickup fees, which brought in \$185,639 in 2019. Together, these two revenue streams generated 76 percent of the organization's annual income last year. The remaining quarter of revenue came from a variety of sources. Residents contributed \$43,654 toward their rental costs, a portion of which is covered by Ontario Works payments, and the City of Ottawa covers some of the furniture-delivery fees. The rest of its budget is covered through furniture sales (in cases when donated items are too large to be easily moved into client apartments), grants, consulting income, and other miscellaneous sources.<sup>8,11,12</sup>

Matthew House Ottawa's financial growth has made it possible for the organization to invest in expansions to its programs. Total expenses have risen from \$194,218 in 2017 to \$362,176 in 2019. A significant portion of the new budget space has been put towards greater staff capacity: spending on salaries and benefits more than doubled, from \$121,501 to \$249,732.<sup>8,11,12</sup>

The organization also relies heavily on volunteers, who offered more than ten thousand hours of service in 2019.<sup>8</sup> Many volunteers are former refugees who received services from Matthew House Ottawa and are looking to give back. The organization believes that this empowerment is one of its most important impacts: "that the people we serve are themselves answering a call to serve others, to help those in need, to build

community, to offer hope—a virtuous cycle that will continue to transform our community and country for the better.”<sup>7</sup> The staff leaders of both the Furniture Bank and Refugee Services programs were first involved with Matthew House Ottawa as volunteers.

In the Refugee Services program, volunteers interact regularly with Matthew House Ottawa residents, helping them with everyday tasks. Their consistent engagement enables them to mentor new volunteers. Other volunteers help residents find and move into longer-term housing when their time at Matthew House Ottawa comes to an end, plan community-building events for residents, cook evening meals at the house, act as translators for residents, or help out with odd jobs around the house as needed. Volunteers also welcome clients to the Furniture Bank and help them choose furniture that would work well in their home. Warehouse assistants carry clients’ new furniture to the truck and members of the truck crew unload it at their home.

## Conclusion

Matthew House Ottawa continues to work to meet the needs of as many refugees and marginalized

families as it can. These needs, however, often run up against financial constraints, as there are almost always more people who need help than the organization can reach with its limited budget. More partnerships with government offer one opportunity for Matthew House Ottawa to increase its capacity to help refugees and other vulnerable Ottawa residents. The organization has integrated both shelter and long-term supports into its Refugee Services program, but it has had to rely on private funding for most of its history. Matthew House Ottawa is only just beginning to partner financially with government to provide these services.

Individuals and organizations have stepped in to help Matthew House Ottawa serve as many people as possible on its limited budget. At the Furniture Bank, for example, a local storage company has helped meet the ongoing challenge of storing and transporting donated items since the earliest days of the program. Volunteers provide critical workers for both programs. Yet as has been the case for many charities, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a wrench into Matthew House Ottawa’s operations. Public-health restrictions have reduced the number of volunteers who are able to serve, requiring



Matthew House Ottawa to adapt quickly in order to keep its programs functioning.

On the other hand, the pandemic has given many Canadians a new appreciation for refugees' contributions to society. "Not everyone understands the plight of refugees and what they bring to the table," explains Doreen Katto, who arrived in Canada as a refugee herself and now coordinates Matthew House Ottawa's Refugee Services program. "Sometimes refugees are considered a burden to the economy. And I believe that during the COVID-19 era, some people have really learned that refugees are very useful in this country. They are the ones supporting the health-care system, for example. And this is beginning to come out."<sup>2</sup>

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## DIAKONIA PROJECT

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