

Welcome to Utrecht: How citizens and the Human Rights City work together to coordinate help for refugees

Welcome to Utrecht is a website www.welkominutrecht.nu and Facebook page www.facebook.com/welkominutrecht set up by some Utrecht citizens to coordinate help for refugees arriving in the city. Since it has been developed, the local authority has been making use of it to coordinate the support made available in the refugee shelters.

In particular, the linkage between the website and the Facebook page allows information to pass around quickly about what residents of Utrecht can do to help refugees. This speeds up the mobilisation of support from citizens and it also encourages new offers of help. Refugees also contribute to the webpage by telling stories about their life in their home country, which breaks down prejudices by giving refugees a human face and a back history.

The case study will help you to learn how local citizens, refugees and local government staff can co-produce better wellbeing for refugees arriving in a city.

Objectives

The City of Utrecht (about 330 000 inhabitants) is the fourth largest city in the Netherlands and the capital of the province of Utrecht. The local council has made a public commitment to making Utrecht a Human Rights City. This public commitment is at the core of current activities to accommodate refugees in Utrecht. Apart from providing a centre for asylum seekers, the city has set up a number of emergency shelters to welcome refugees. At the same time the city is looking for additional temporary and permanent locations to house asylum seekers.

Utrecht first accommodated 500 unaccompanied men of mainly Syrian origin, in an exhibition hall in September 2015. After transferring this group of people to another city by 7 November, a new emergency shelter location had to be sought for another 500 refugees: men, women and children (70% from Syria, 15% from Eritrea and 15% from other countries). This location opened on 20 November 2015.

In principle, the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) is responsible for the accommodation of asylum seekers in the Netherlands. However, the COA works closely with the municipalities where asylum seekers' centres are located. When asylum see-...



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kers are granted a permit the municipalities have duties to provide for housing and integration of resident permit holders. But Utrecht Council chooses also to offer activities for refugees to improve their quality of life. In particular, the local authority is working with local residents to ensure that refugees come to understand more about the Netherlands and the Dutch.

Change management

Both the website and Facebook page were developed independently by two groups of founders. In the case of the website, they knew each other through the sports club where their children were active and they also had in common that they worked in communications. Wim, Esther, Saskia, Dylan and Robbert wanted to use their expertise to positively influence public opinion on refugees.

In the case of the Facebook page, Katinka, Rebecca, Hellen and Frank were a group of old friends who got together to discuss how they could make refugees feel at home in Utrecht.

Both groups could see that many local people wanted to help the 500 refugees who were temporarily located in the De Jaarbeurs exhibition hall in Utrecht - but who did not know how they could help. In addition, they wanted to give the refugees arriving to Utrecht a more human image which would counterbalance media reports focusing mainly on numbers and highlighting critical voices

who were not welcoming. The two groups quickly worked together and integrated the website and Facebook initiative. In line with the Dutch culture of collaboration, both groups harnessed their networks to obtain pro bono assistance from local copywriters and photographers.

The website is used as the channel where people can submit initiatives via a contact form (Governance International can confirm that there is quick and constructive feedback to proposals made through the form!). Moreover, the website offers clear information on what people can do and provides links to organisations and citizen initiatives they can join. Additionally, it offers reports on current and past activities, as well as interviews with volunteers and refugees. The Facebook page mainly activates volunteers. It shows calls for voluntary assistance for initiatives that are currently running and also provides short reports or links to stories on the website. In principal Welcome to Utrecht does not organise activities itself but rather coordinates the volunteering activities of others in the city.

Welcome to Utrecht works closely with the municipality of Utrecht. Through the contact form, incoming inquiries and offers are screened by the volunteers and answered initially. If an initiative is considered to be beneficial, it is sent to the municipality, which promotes it in the shelter. Welcome to Utrecht and the municipality regularly consult on specific questions and offers. They exchange knowledge and experiences in order to improve the streamlining of the support offered. The municipality hi-

ghlights the Welcome to Utrecht website and Facebook page as the portal for aid to refugees in the city. Welcome to Utrecht and the municipality also jointly staff information desks about voluntary support opportunity during information evenings which are run for citizens living in the surroundings of the shelters.

Over the past months, Welcome to Utrecht supported a large number of activities by matching initiatives, volunteers and refugees with each other – something that social media are especially effective in doing. For example, a «Come and Eat» event has been organised a number of times. The last was on 25 October 2015, when nearly 400 refugees were hosted by Utrecht citizens who invited them home for dinner and to socialize in their family environment. Also, many volunteers have been recruited to distribute clothing to refugees at a local mosque. And in addition there have been many other activities such as football tournaments, games afternoons, language lessons, a visit to a school, learning to ride a bike, concert visits and music workshops. Refugees have taken full advantage of these activities.

Outcomes

With the support of Welcome to Utrecht, it is possible to offer a continuous range of activities for refugees. The manager of the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers in the Netherlands has indicated that this helps to reduce tensions among refugees who still are in a frustrating, stressful situation. And the encounters ●●



between refugees and citizens during all these activities have helped to increase the support for refugees within the wider society. On the Facebook page several refugees have posted thank you messages, mostly by means of a picture or a single word. The first batch of refugees have also expressed their appreciation through a letter to the mayor in which they wrote: «Our stay in your town was brief but heart-warming. Knowing that we can count on help from our fellow men gives us a sense of safety and trust in life and humanity. You can imagine that we find it hard to feel trust in our world today. Therefore, what you give us is priceless. And therefore our gratitude is great.» A volunteer who had two refugees as her guests for dinner recounts her experience: “ It helps that we have met

such fine people as Aram and Kaleed, especially because the public debate about refugees is all about ‘numbers’, ‘quotas’ and ‘sober shelter’. You quickly lose sight of the human side. The Council has thanked Welcome to Utrecht and all volunteers for their support and a proud mayor Van Zanen said: “Heartwarming, all those volunteers, so impressive.”

Performance indicators

500 refugees were welcomed since early September 2015 in the emergency shelter. Refugees are staying there from a few days to several weeks. The shelter closed on 7 November. On 20 November another emergency

shelter opened, again for 500 people. It will remain in use until 1 May 2016.

From this shelter the refugees go to another centre in the Netherlands to continue their procedures for admission. Approximately 20 people are directly involved in the Facebook page and website, including communications professionals, (web)designers, copywriters and photographers.

More than 100 initiatives have been put forward and hundreds of volunteers have been matched with refugees who needed specific kinds of help.

Welcome to Utrecht (website and Facebook) is also being used as a platform for activities around the new emergency shelter, where volunteer coordinators for several ●●

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Wie vlucht?

500 vluchtelingen worden opgevangen in Kanaleneiland. Het is een getal. Maar daar achter zitten gewone mensen. Zoals Rami, Amer en Mershaw.

Maak kennis



Wie helpt?

Honderden Utrechters zetten zich in. Gezinnen, collega's, sportvrienden, buurtbewoners, moskee- en kerkgangers. Vaak in de luwte. Gewone mensen. Zoals Mariëlle, Wassim en Isabel.

Maak kennis



En jij?

Wil jij meehelpen in Utrecht? Dat kan. Op veel manieren. Bedenk een eigen initiatief. Of help mee met bestaande activiteiten. Wat je doet, kies jij.

Maak het verschil

issues (such as language, food, music, creative, meetings and sports) match and combine them into a weekly offering of recurring and non-recurring activities.

Costs and savings

The website and Facebook page are completely set up and managed by volunteers. Because part of the group consists of communication professionals, it was possible to develop everything for free. Savings are indirect. Thanks to the organisation of the wide range of activities, the refugee reception is of better quality than would otherwise be possible. This prevents, or at least reduces, reduces the possible occurrence of tensions in society and among the refugees themselves, and these impacts eventually have an impact in reducing the costs of public services.

Lessons to be learned

Do not institutionalise too much how volunteers contribute to the reception of refugees but leave room for spontaneity and enthusiasm.

Local government also has an important role in support voluntary initiatives by using its authority: Generating publicity in the media; and facilitating access to official bodies and other organizations. In all these ways, it can provide authority to back up citizen initiatives, without compromising the independence of those citizens.

An important lesson for Welcome to Utrecht was its focus. It succeeded by being careful not to take up polemical

positions, it remained politically neutral and it knew what its core purpose was and what it should remain.

Further information

The acute refugee problem in the Netherlands is getting much attention. Welcome to Utrecht wanted to use this publicity, and the momentum which the urgency of the refugee crisis has created, to involve residents of Utrecht more in volunteering in the long-run, and not just during the immediate crisis. This is important not just for the hundreds of asylum seekers who have always been there, and of course also for other needy people in the city. To achieve this, it is essential to make visible what people can achieve together and how many existing organisations and initiatives are already up and running, that people can join.

Governance International case study
www.govint.org

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