



DIAKONIA  
PROJECT

## Matthew House - Ottawa

Matthew House Ottawa was founded in 2010 by a group of visionary volunteers with strong connections to the Baptist church. Our work is now supported by a variety of churches including Baptist, Catholic, United, Anglican, Presbyterian, Be in Christ, Vineyard—as well as the broader Ottawa community.

Modelled after Matthew House in Toronto, Matthew House Ottawa's name derives from our Christian roots: we are motivated by Jesus's call in Matthew 25:35 to feed, clothe, shelter, and serve our global neighbours who arrive into our community. The key values that guide our work derive from our Christian foundation and include hospitality, loving service, compassion, respecting human dignity, and building community. These values permeate our programs and interactions between staff, volunteers, and the people we serve. As Arao—a client turned volunteer turned staff person—put it, “I'm not doing this job for the money. I'm doing it because I like helping people. As a Christian I am living out my faith through my work at Matthew House Ottawa.” Service has been central to our identity, and we seek to serve in ways that offer dignity and humanity to those who have experienced marginalization.

Starting over is never easy. And for the hundreds of refugees who arrive in Ottawa each year, starting over can feel impossible. Many find themselves sleeping on the streets or in crowded shelters, wondering how they will ever find a job or a safe place to live in a city full of strangers. After fleeing persecution, they now find themselves navigating a whole new set of obstacles.

We believe that no one should face these challenges alone. For the refugees we serve, Matthew House Ottawa is more than just a place to live: it is the promise of a new beginning. The people who walk through our doors come with little more than determination and the clothes on their backs. When they leave after a few months with us, they leave with the skills, resources, support, and confidence necessary to live independently in their new home in Canada.

Beyond the basic necessities of food, shelter, and safety that we have provided to more than 270 refugees, Matthew House Ottawa offers on-site support for submitting a refugee claim, securing employment, finding a house, and adapting to life in Ottawa—all in a family-style home environment. Whether it is connecting with a lawyer or doctor, or helping to write a résumé, we are here to make the transition easier in a highly stressful time. As one former resident recalls,

*The environment was so very different from the shelter I'd stayed at before. I had a bed of my own, a place to lie down and rest. From the second I walked through the door, it felt like home. My soul settled for the first time since leaving for Canada. I knew then that I was going to be okay. . . . I'm living proof that everyday people can touch and change lives. After all, it's thanks to Matthew House Ottawa supporters that I am where I am today. I'm so blessed to have been given this second chance.*



Matthew House Ottawa also runs a furniture bank program. Seeing a gap in services for those transitioning to permanent housing, the furniture bank was established to help newcomers and low-income families make their house a home. We believe that nobody should have to sleep and eat on the floor, and today we furnish upwards of seven hundred households each year to help reach that goal. Clients referred by social services and community partners around the city get time to walk through the showroom with a Matthew House Ottawa volunteer and select the items they want for their homes. This unique “shopping” experience gives people in challenging circumstances the dignity of choice, after months or years spent navigating systems that control so much of their destiny.

As Christians we believe that each person is created in God's image and is to be loved. We seek to welcome the stranger with compassion, walking alongside those who have been marginalized. These underlying beliefs and actions grounded in our faith affect not just what we do but also how we do it, which in turn makes an impression on the people we serve: "There was so much love," said Hassan. "I've never seen displays from good people like this—people who want to help you when you have a problem."

At Matthew House Ottawa, we offer the gift of a new beginning. Many of the people we serve have had to leave everything behind, and they are eager to get back on their feet. In meeting people's basic needs, we remove a big weight off of their shoulders. As Raxon describes it, "It was a big burden to have no furniture and no money to buy any furniture. Coming to the furniture bank and receiving the items we needed was a big relief." The people we serve consistently share with us that they feel dignity, gratitude, hope, and empowerment in the process. Like Arao, whose family needed beds, mattresses, and living room furniture. "When we first moved to Ottawa, we were sitting on the floor. . . . The furniture made our home look beautiful. I was so grateful."



With basic needs met, empowered people become connected to a supportive community and are able to stand on their own as they start their new life. With greater hope, many of the people we serve seek to contribute to their community almost immediately after receiving support themselves. "Matthew House Ottawa didn't know me, but they were so kind and helped me fully furnish my empty apartment," said Bemvindo. "My family feels so blessed . . . I now volunteer because I want to be a part in helping others have the same experience as I had with Matthew House Ottawa's furniture bank program."

This is perhaps the most important outcome of our work: 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. They too come to live out the call of Christ in Matthew 25:35. “When I came to Canada with my wife and daughter, we lived in a shelter. It didn’t feel like home—everything was very temporary,” said Pierre. “I was so grateful for Matthew House Ottawa’s furniture bank program that I knew I wanted to help others the same way I had been helped. I immediately asked if I could become a volunteer. My time at the furniture bank has been incredibly rewarding. This is truly humanitarian work. I can feel the positivity and compassion of the people I work alongside every day. We are all thankful to be a part of serving our community.”



The Greek word ‘diakonia’ expresses the act of being called to serve. The Cardus Religious Freedom Institute’s Diakonia Project presents a series of eight different initiatives in which Canadians of faith serve their community. This highlights a core aspect of religious freedom: the freedom to live out one’s deepest held beliefs through concrete actions that serve the common good.

[This article has been written by a member of the faith community that supports this initiative. All views, opinions, and theological viewpoints are those of the author.]

