

Working for Justice
The Partnership Between UNHCR and Franciscan Mission Service

At the intersection of social justice, career leadership development, and Franciscan spirituality, you'll find the DC Service Corps, a program created by Franciscan Mission Service (FMS) in 2015. DC Service Corps was developed to help meet the needs of both local nonprofits seeking passionate servant leaders and young adults desiring a Franciscan-hearted and justice-centered service experience.

For over thirty years, FMS has been building partnerships with lay Catholic women and men who are inspired to live and serve in solidarity with economically poor communities across the globe as advocates for peace, justice, reconciliation, and care of creation. Seven years ago, they began applying their knowledge and experience from training Overseas Lay Missioners to the 11-month DC Service Corps program.

DC Service Corps volunteers are placed in nonprofits throughout DC and live together in an intentional community at FMS' house of hospitality, *Casa San Salvador*, in Northeast DC during their year of service.

Starting in 2020, Franciscan Mission Service began a partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This placement site gives young adults in the DC Service Corps program the opportunity to grow in the understanding of local and international influences on migration through serving alongside experienced human rights advocates.



Current DC Service Corps volunteer Grace Kuber, a recent graduate of Alma College, serves as a Protection Counselor at the UNHCR, assisting the Individual Case team as they provide support for refugees, forcibly displaced communities, and stateless people.

“At the UNHCR, we work hard to promote accessibility for all people,” says Grace. “For individuals who are detained, it is difficult for them to have access to information, legal representation, a safe environment, and other basic human needs. We really try to assist all people, no matter their background or what they have, for a chance at a better life. There are a lot

of unknowns when you are a refugee or asylum seeker, so we try to provide as much information and assistance as we can.”

Grace works with individuals struggling with the effects of family separation, resettlement, and the danger of returning to their country of origin. As a Protection Counselor, she assists asylum seekers, refugees, and their family members by listening to their stories and connecting them with legal resources through UNHCR’s hotline.

“Every day I interact with a person who puts my own life into perspective,” reflects Grace. “Family members advocating for their people in war-torn, tumultuous countries, people who are living in the worst parts of the world, mothers who have to choose between which child to feed; it is very difficult listening to these stories and why they need help. Although it is difficult, it has made me much more grateful for the life I am able to live now. Patience is also something my ministry has helped me with. Most of the individuals I speak with are not fluent in English. They are in a horrible situation, but they can’t relay it to me because there is a language barrier. I owe it to them and their story to be patient and listen to what they are telling me.”

Between difficult stories and receiving situations that are out of UNHCR jurisdiction, Grace has been learning to manage expectations and serve faithfully in the capacity that she can, a healthy reminder for all who work in the field of social justice.

“I am not able to help every person that calls or writes to us; it just isn’t possible. But whatever we have, we give. The UNHCR is full of knowledge and the ability to research, and so we’ll help people with whatever they need to know. The UNHCR has provided me with a lot of helpful training for how to speak, write, and handle case interactions. I’ve also received training regarding specific pathways for the asylum and refugee process, so I can pass that knowledge onto individuals in need.”

This unique and dynamic partnership between FMS and UNHCR creates a stepping stone for young adults interested in social justice work, gives them the opportunity to use their gifts to make a difference, and cultivates a Franciscan-hearted spirit.

“I’ve always had a passion for nonprofit work but through this, I found a new passion for bureaucratic procedures,” Grace says. “Coming into this year of service, I knew nothing about Franciscanism or what that meant. FMS was a perfect little surprise.”

For more information about FMS and DC Service Corps, visit www.franciscanmissionservice.org.