

**Lorrie Foster**

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### **Corporate Volunteering Response to the Refugee Challenge**

Over one million migrants and refugees left their homes for Europe last year and nearly 200,000 have been added since the beginning of 2016, creating the worst migration crisis since World War II. Many of the refugees are fleeing the brutal civil war in Syria and neighboring countries including Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey have taken in millions of refugees since 2011.

Although not all of the new arrivals to Europe are seeking asylum, many do with Germany receiving the highest number of applications –nearly 500,000 in 2015. Hungary and Sweden are also seeing a large number of asylum applications.

While EU nations grapple with how to manage the influx, corporations and numerous volunteers have jumped in and taken a leadership role to address the needs of the refugees.

The International Association for Volunteer Effort, (IAVE), is a global network of NGOs, businesses, national volunteer centers and grassroots leaders of volunteering, with members in 70 countries across all the regions of the world. The organization, founded in 1970, exists to promote, strengthen and celebrate volunteering in the myriad ways it happens throughout the world. Its members share a belief in the power of volunteers to make a significant strategic contribution to resolving the world's most pressing problems.

IAVE's global corporate members share inspiring practices in employee volunteering through its Global Corporate Volunteer Council. Members of another IAVE network, the Research Working Group on Disaster-Related Corporate Volunteering, have been analyzing ways that corporate volunteers can respond before, during and after humanitarian disasters. Last year members became acutely aware of the need for a significant corporate response to the refugee crisis. Several companies acted quickly in a variety of ways, leveraging their funds and their employees' skills, often on a volunteer basis.

**Google** has been very active in the refugee response efforts. The company ran an external gift match campaign that in 48 hours raised €5M to support the work of Doctors Without Borders, International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. An employee gift match campaign raised \$1.5M. GooglersGive Disaster Corps, a crisis-volunteering program, was deployed and volunteers were dispersed to make connectivity in the region more widespread and reliable. Google partnered with NetHope and Cisco to deploy robust access solutions. Recently the company made a \$5.3 million grant to sup-

port the launch of Project Reconnect, a program by NetHope to equip nonprofits working with refugees in Germany with Chromebooks, in order to facilitate easier access to education for refugees.

**UPS** has been supporting relief efforts for Syrian and Iraq refugees for the past three years. The company serves as UNHCR's emergency standby partner to transport critical supplies for refugees including high-energy biscuits, blankets, sleeping mats and solar lanterns. It also provides emergency funding to UNHCR. The UPS Foundation is funding the work of the Salvation Army to support Syrian refugees in Europe with food, housing and legal advice. Employee volunteers are working across Europe to assist refugees.

**Telefonica** has a robust program of employee volunteers serving in Spain as one-on-one mentors for refugees. Employees assist on a weekly basis with a variety of assimilation tasks ranging from familiarization with the community, understanding the local transportation network, providing legal assistance and guidance on work-related issues. In another program employees spend a week of their personal holiday time working with refugees on health, leisure or cultural activities.

**IBM** has worked with the German Red Cross to develop an information management system for a refugee reception center in Mannheim. In Italy, IBM created a mobile and web-based application to enable NGO Intersos' staff to register migrants and to capture demographic, health status, family, and socioeconomic information by capturing textual and image data. Employee volunteers are also active in Austria, Turkey, France, and Sweden.

**Ritz Carlton** employees in Wolfsburg began working with the German Red Cross to help sort donated clothes. They quickly grew their involvement to work with the 1000 refugees in their community by sharing their traditions including egg-painting events for children at Easter, volleyball and soccer games for children, and a women-only breakfast buffet.

**RBC** is developing employee volunteer activities in cooperation with local settlement agencies to support refugees settling in Canada. The bank is providing \$1 million in funding to the Immigrant Access Fund in coordination with employee volunteer projects.

Other companies are making significant contributions with employee volunteers.

**Siemens** has launched a multi-stage, long-term program for integrating refugees in Germany. The company has donated a total of 1 million euros to support the plan and is providing practical support in an equivalent amount. The company launched an internship program and provides German language classes and shelter facilities for refugees. Siemens is also supporting its employee volunteers with paid leave for voluntary work in aid organizations.

**Deutsche Telekom** employees are active volunteers in a variety of ways. They have launched a training program to help refugees learn how to apply for jobs. Employee volunteers also serve as German language mentors for adults helping them regularly practice their new language. An internal on-line platform enables Telekom employees to search for other oppor-

tunities to volunteer in their communities to help refugees and other in need.

The consulting firm **KPMG** is allowing its employees in Germany to receive paid time off while volunteering to help refugees.

Clearly the corporate sector is showing how socially responsible it can be through its support for the range of needs of refugees. Recent collaborative initiatives are impressive in that they highlight the power of cooperation and leadership by example.

The We-together initiative of 36 Germany companies that have joined together to promote the integration of refugees is a prime example. Another initiative announced earlier this year by Hamdi Ulukaya, CEO and founder of Chobani yogurt, through the establishment of the Tent Foundation, will galvanize companies through their pledges of money and jobs for refugees and will help address this historical challenge.

IAVE members are eager to learn more about the corporate responses to date and to discuss new ideas. They also want to determine what other collaborations to help the refugees might be possible. In partnership with BBE, Bagfa, CCCD, CEV, AmCham Germany, and with sponsorship from UPS, IAVE will be hosting a one-day Forum: *Corporate Volunteer Response to the Refugee Challenge* on 19 May, in Berlin. The goal is to have a lively discussion on what companies can do individually or collectively to create greater impact on the refugee challenge<sup>1</sup>.

### **Author**

**Lorrie Foster** *Lorrie Foster manages the Global Corporate Volunteer Council and Research Group on Disaster-Related Corporate Volunteering for the International Association for Volunteer Effort. She previously worked for the Conference Board, the global think tank where she managed conferences, research working groups, and then councils, the organization's signature peer networking program. Ms. Foster also led The World Trade Institute formerly located in the World Trade Center in New York. She began her career at AT&T International where she was part of the task force that developed the company's first global strategic plan. Lorrie Foster earned a MPA from the Harvard Kennedy School and an A.B. in Diplomacy and World Affairs from Occidental College.*

**Contact:** [lorrie@iave.org](mailto:lorrie@iave.org)

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see: <https://www.iave.org/iaveforum2016/>

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Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement (BBE)

Michaelkirchstr. 17/18

10179 Berlin

Tel.: +49 (0) 30 62980-114

[europa-bbe@b-b-e.de](mailto:europa-bbe@b-b-e.de)

[www.b-b-e.de](http://www.b-b-e.de)