

Mercy Volunteers Help Immigrants in New York

Mercy Volunteer Corps members Anne McCabe and Rebecca Rybaltowski show mercy and grace to immigrants in Brooklyn and Queens.

Working in the New York offices of Catholic Migration Services, an organization that provides educational, advocacy, and legal services to immigrants in the New York area, the two women also live together in Queens with four other Mercy volunteers.

In these positions, they help immigrants complete documents, handle labor issues, find services and safe, affordable housing, and obtain citizenship.



Mercy Corps volunteer Rebecca Rybaltowski (right) sits with Jesuit volunteer Megan Helbling (left) and Public Allies volunteer Kim Kearns (center), at Catholic Migration Services in Queens, New York.

“The people we help know it is their right to be treated fairly and to get paid. They might not have known that before they talked to us.”

- Rebecca Rybaltowski, Mercy Corps volunteer at Catholic Migration Services, NY

“A day in our office is very busy,” says Anne, a graduate of the University of Maryland with a degree in Government & Political Science and Spanish who is from Baltimore City, MD. “Even though I speak Spanish, sometimes language can be a barrier because many of my clients are Caribbean, Haitian or Creole and speak different dialects.”

Also, the road to citizenship can be a lengthy process. “If you are applying yourself, sometimes you can gain citizenship quickly, but if you are applying for someone else, it could be years,” says Anne. “If you’re coming from Mexico, it could take up to 20 years.”

Rebecca, a graduate of Gordon College from upstate New York with a major in Spanish, is in her second year at Catholic Migration Services.

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She worked as an immigration counselor last year, but now translates for the lawyers who don't speak Spanish and works in the labor department, helping to advocate for workers' rights.

Workers in the New York area can call a bilingual hotline to report employers who are not paying them, not paying enough, or forcing them to work in unsafe conditions. Rebecca listens to their stories and determines whether they should be passed along to the U.S. Department of Health, who will then look into the complaint.

"Some people are working for three dollars an hour and, at first, many are worried about calling because they are afraid of getting deported, but the Department of Immigration is not notified and they can call the number anonymously," says Rebecca.



Mercy Corps volunteer Rebecca Rybaltowski (left) gives a presentation at Catholic Migration Services in Queens, New York.

"We are all working together for the common goal of helping society, to show compassion and understanding and sometimes just to be good listeners."

***- Anne McCabe,
Mercy Corps
volunteer at
Catholic Migration
Services, NY***

Many of the people Rebecca talks to work in restaurants, delis, or construction, but one of the worst stories she heard was from a Trinidadian woman who was working in a Manhattan lawyer's office six days a week from 9 a.m. until midnight and was paid \$100 a week. Catholic Migration Services immediately sent the complaint to the Department of Labor, though Rebecca says they do not always hear if the Department of Labor takes the cases from there.

"What these people deal with on a daily basis is really tough to hear," says Rebecca. "Knowing that you've helped someone, even though we are often only the liaison, is really meaningful. We are at least a starting point for many people. We can't help everyone, but the people we do help know it is their right to be treated fairly and to get paid. They might not have known that before they called and talked with us."

Anne helps clients of many ages with various types of applications, from green card and childhood arrival paperwork to temporary protected status for people like earthquake victims from Haiti.

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“I’ve always wanted to do something that genuinely helps people have a better quality of life,” says Anne. “Immigration can really affect the make-up of a family unit. I enjoy my one-on-one contact with clients, learning about people’s lives and helping them complete the necessary documents.”

Catholic Migration Services also helps with housing rights, as many immigrants are taken advantage of by their landlords who threaten to turn them over to authorities.

“We are all working together for the common goal of helping society, to show compassion and understanding, and sometimes just to be good listeners,” says Anne.

“I’ve been noticing the word ‘mercy’ in a lot of things I see, the words ‘mercy’ and ‘merciful,’” says Rebecca. “That really sticks with me; that’s what I’m doing. I’m showing mercy and grace to people who may not have known what it was before.”

For more information, visit: [***Catholic Migration Services***](#)