



## Friends Place Off to a Strong Start

By Alex Frandsen



When FCNL Education Fund assumed management and oversight of Friends Place in 2019, the intention was to do far more than simply accrue real estate on Capitol Hill. The guesthouse on Capitol Hill, owned and operated by Quakers since 1966, was viewed as an ideal opportunity to carry out Friends' commitment to civic engagement. By blending hospitality and justice-oriented programming, Friends Place could serve as a unique hub for visitors to Washington, D.C.

Now, more than four months after it opened its doors, that vision has come to fruition. Friends Place staff have hosted more than 20 groups since February 2022, and dozens more are on the calendar. "The building is full of sounds; life; and many, many guests," said Sarah Johnson, director of Friends Place.

Most of the visitors consist of students. But recently, the guesthouse has also served as a temporary resting spot for migrants, many of whom were bussed up from the southern border by Texas Governor Greg Abbott. Although not mentioned by name, it was cited by a New York Times article for providing comfortable quarters for those amid a long and grueling journey.

"The space was beautiful, and the welcome was Divine," wrote one of the migrants.

Friends Place has hosted 168 migrants. Of the first group, 15 migrants were hosted for a brief respite and 57 for overnight stays. "I see it as a way for us to live into our values as a staff and as an organization," Johnson said. "At Friends Place, we're all about hospitality and justice, so what better way to use the space than that?"

In addition to hosting migrants, Friends Place has also seen a steady stream of other visiting groups. visitors, largely comprised of student groups. So far, Friends Place has hosted 18 groups, with 24 more scheduled through June 30.

That figure doesn't include the number of groups who canceled their reservations in January, February, and March due to the winter spike of COVID-19. Since then, Friends Place has managed to largely avoid pandemic difficulties. "Nearly everyone has been great about COVID protocols," said Johnson.

"Just the way the space is set up, no one shares a bunkroom or bathroom with people outside their group, and everyone wears masks in shared spaces."



*Friends Place Director Sarah Johnson conducts a mid-night orientation session after a late night arrival of migrants from Texas. Friends Place has hosted 168 people coming to D.C. on buses from Texas through our partnership with Sanctuary DMV.*



Students from Mount Madonna School in Watsonville, California, stayed a week at Friends Place in May. One student wrote that their trip “has deepened my understanding of how the U.S. government works, which I know will be most important in the future.”

Thus far, the feedback from visitors has been overwhelmingly positive. Johnson reports that several groups who stayed have already requested to be on the calendar for next year—some of them making the request before they’ve even checked out.

Johnson has heard that groups appreciate the multiple meeting spaces, the backyard, and having their own rooms separate from other groups.

Friends Place has also been bolstered by the hiring of a new program coordinator, Olivia Delaplaine. A life-long resident of the D.C. area, Delaplaine previously worked in policy advocacy and community development.

As program coordinator at Friends Place, she helps facilitate civic engagement programming and helps in the planning and logistics of running the guesthouse. “Olivia allows us to host more groups, have a more open calendar, and just give everyone more care and attention,” said Johnson.

Even with a strong start to its inaugural year, Friends Place has some exciting months ahead. Open houses—including one for neighborhood residents—are planned and outreach efforts are being ramped up.

“We’re at a point where we’re formalizing operations, expanding outreach, and just putting finishing touches on the building,” Johnson said.

All in all, Friends Place is on track to meet and even exceed expectations for the fiscal year. “We’ll likely have 60 groups and 1,000 people in FY20233,” said Johnson. “It’s a big goal that we set for ourselves, but one we should definitely hit.”

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*The Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), FCNL Education Fund, and Friends Place on Capitol Hill are nonprofit, nonpartisan Quaker organizations working collectively to advance peace, justice, and environmental stewardship.*

Friends Place Newsletter, a publication of Friends Place on Capitol Hill, is published every six months.

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