

For Immediate Release



## **Syrian refugee relief crisis evokes community-wide response at AUB**

Beirut, Lebanon- 17/02/2014 - Safety concerns, weather and other obstacles are only minor inconveniences to teams of American University of Beirut (AUB) relief volunteers and AUB Medical Center (AUBMC) health workers determined to alleviate the suffering of Lebanon's growing population of Syrian refugees. Three years of conflict and the mass exodus of more than one million displaced Syrians into Lebanon have presented the country with a large-scale humanitarian crisis. Refugee issues including crushing poverty, traumatized families and related health issues place a severe strain on social service and support services, and an urgent demand for humanitarian support is only increasing.

Cognizant of the obligation to support this vulnerable population and to alleviate its most urgent needs, AUB and its medical center have mobilized relief efforts including mobile medical services and other aid to refugees.

"The Syrian refugees in the North and Bekaa are in dire need of medical support; that is why we have developed multiple programs to allow us to provide the primary and urgent care medical services they require," said Dr. Mohamed Sayegh, vice president and dean of the Faculty of Medicine.

Beginning in January of this year, a mobile clinic staffed by team of two doctors, a nurse, and an administrative assistant, has been traveling to the Bekaa region and the North twice a week. The mobile clinic, housed in a bus, is equipped with medical supplies to diagnose and treat those who are ill. The clinic goes to refugee camps and schools run by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and Beyond, which is a local NGO that is subcontracted by the Ministry of Public Health.

The bus was provided by the local non-governmental organization Ajjalouna (Arabic for "our generations"); the clinic itself is supported by a number of donors who wish to remain anonymous.

The medical team traveling with the mobile clinic are able to see as many as 30 children during each day trip. Examinations and medication are provided free-of-charge. As of early February 2014, the clinics have made 424 examinations and dispensed 330 boxes of medication.

Doctors are shocked by the poverty they see on their rounds.

Khairat al-Habbal, second-year family medicine resident at AUBMC who regularly volunteers on the mobile clinic, said, "I remember this little girl who came into the clinic from the bitter

cold, shivering, while I was wearing three layers and shivering myself! The real disease is poverty and the situation they are living in.”

Dr. Ghassan Hamadeh, professor and chairperson at AUBMC’s Department of Family Medicine that runs the mobile clinic project, agrees: “We picked schools because it was the most natural and effective way to collect children in one place for examinations,” he said. “This method allows us to deliver high-impact care with minimal effort to those who are most vulnerable to the spread of disease, especially given the lack of proper sanitation in many refugee settlements.”

“We usually see issues such as lice, scabies, dental problems, growth retardation and acute upper respiratory infections,” said Dr. Mona Osman, clinical family medicine instructor at AUBMC and a co-manager of the mobile clinic project alongside Dr. Hamadeh.

Osman noted that safety in unregulated camps or around Tripoli is a major concern, and also weather and transport sometimes hinder access. However, these impediments are not stopping the project from expanding. “Now we are looking into badly-needed vaccination programs for these children, with the help of the Ministry of Health.”

Some refugees need more than basic medical care. For that purpose, AUBMC has partnered with New Mazloum Hospital in Tripoli and Mayyas Hospital in the Bekaa to set up two Urgent Care Centers (UCCs), for those refugees who require hospitalization.

With the help of donors, AUBMC has created the Displaced Syrian Needy Patients Fund (DSNPF) that provides resources to refugee host communities and individuals who need treatment at AUBMC or partner hospitals, usually at discounted rates. Since June 2013 and as of January 2014, more than 3,300 have benefitted.

“We are planning to do more visits through the AUBMC mobile clinic and receive more patients at UCCs; but this requires additional funds,” said Imad Sadek, managing director of External Medical Affairs at AUBMC, who runs the UCC project and manages the DSNPF. Since June 2013 the fund has attracted \$1.35 million and Sadek expects that figure to increase, thus allowing AUBMC to expand its assistance to needy Syrian refugees.

AUB’s assistance to needy refugees is not confined to medical assistance.

Syrian refugee relief crisis evokes community-wide response at AUB

As of early February 2014, the clinics have made 424 examinations and dispensed 330 boxes of medication.

Since October 2012, The Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service (CCECS) has been working on a number of projects under the umbrella of the “Syrian Relief Project.” The first project, “Hand-in-Hand”, was started by a group of students who collected blankets, food baskets, heating devices, and clothing from the AUB community and distributed them to different areas in the capital.

Since then, CCECS has extended operations in collaboration with a number of active student societies and clubs. “We now have some 3000 kilograms of non-food items ready for distribution, and more is on the way,” said Mounir Mabsout, director of the CCECS.

Donations to the CCECS have started to become larger and so too the projects, mainly under the CCECS's Community Development Projects unit (CDPu).

The CDPu is focused on improving living spaces for Syrians while taking into consideration Lebanese regulations that prohibit permanent housing for refugees. The unit started by refurbishing a settlement area outside of Sidon last year where over 1000 refugees had been living in squalor.

“When we first arrived there was no septic tank, no running water, no nothing,” said Rabih Shibli, head of the CDPu. “We fixed numerous problems and provided a decent living environment but we decided that we needed to do more.” Having successfully implemented this sanitation project, the CCECS received \$100,000 dollars in funding from a UK-based organization and now runs similar projects across the country.

The CDPu has also teamed up with different departments to devise a shelter called ghata, or “cover” in Arabic, a model of which now stands outside West Hall in AUB. The ghata was designed and constructed by teams from CCECS and the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture and the Faculty of Agriculture and Food Science landscape design program. AUB's Civil Engineering Society and CCCES erected the first ghata in September in a camp in the south of Lebanon.

Recently, caretaker Minister of Social Affairs Wael Abou Faour visited the model and said that he wanted to use it as the official Lebanese government structure for Syrian refugees as a classroom unit, according to Shibli.

The Ministry of Social Affairs is signing an agreement adopting the ghata as a classroom unit in informal tent settlements. This agreement will be finalized in the coming days, added Shibli.

Ghata can be constructed without concrete and is in line with Lebanese restrictions on permanent housing.

Shibli and his team have started at least 30 cash-for-work programs to help refugees build their schools, sanitation facilities and domiciles in refugee areas. “You have to give people dignity through work and living conditions. AUB cannot disconnect from this reality; we need to connect the community here in Beirut to what's going on around the country,” said Mabsout. “After learning about the structure and all the initiatives being done by the various units at AUB, the Social Affairs Minister said that AUB needs to be the brains of the government in terms of the Syrian refugee crisis.”

CDPu is leading a biweekly coordination meeting with local NGOs that are active in the relief process.

Several AUB departments and faculties have joined forces with CCECS, working on different aspects of the relief projects. These include, in addition to AUBMC: the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Relations; the Faculty of Health Sciences' Outreach and Practice Unit; the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences' Environment and Sustainable Development Unit and the AREC farm in support of healthy “kitchens” and food security; the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture in support of sustainability and infrastructure and

planning; the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, offering psychological support, and many clubs and societies who have contributed to volunteering activities.

“Crisis creates momentum and AUB was ready to intervene,” said Mabsout. “But we have to remain proactive not reactive if we are to become the knowledge base for the government, the refugee community and Lebanese society,” concluded Shibli.

To donate to AUB’s Syrian refugee response activities visit AUB’s Giving Page and select the Syrian Refugees Relief Fund from the drop down menu on the giving form.

ENDS

**For more information please contact:**

Maha Al-Azar, Director of News and Information, [ma110@aub.edu.lb](mailto:ma110@aub.edu.lb),  
01-75 96 85

**Note to Editors**

### **About AUB**

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 700 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,500 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor’s, master’s, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

**Stay up to date on AUB news and events. Follow us on:**

Website: [www.aub.edu.lb](http://www.aub.edu.lb)  
Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/aub.edu.lb>  
Twitter: [http://twitter.com/AUB\\_Lebanon](http://twitter.com/AUB_Lebanon)