

# Izzy Dolls for Syrian Refugees

A good background on the Izzy Doll project and an illustrative video are available at:  
<http://cmea-agmc.ca/story-izzy-dolls>

Up to now these Izzy dolls have been delivered around the world to give a little bit of joy to children who, through no fault of their own, have ended up in a miserable situation caused by war or major natural disasters. In the past decade, more than 80,000 Izzy Dolls have been delivered.

By early December 2015, thousands of children from similar circumstances will be arriving in Canada as part of the Syrian Refugee Project. Many of these children will have endured an extended period in Refugee Camps and will have few possessions other than the clothes on their backs and what can be carried in a suitcase or bag.

Their reception in Canada will be quite traumatic for them and it is planned to assist as many as can be helped by the provision of an Izzy Doll. The following article from the Ottawa Citizen provides some recent information.

## Izzy dolls comfort refugee children

By : Paula McCooey, Ottawa Citizen  
Published on: November 17, 2015

The Canadian military is hoping to recruit volunteers with a specific skill set: knitting.

That's right. It wants you to help knit the national gift of peace, the [Izzy Doll](#). For the past two decades, Canadian soldiers and health care workers have given out more than 1.3 million of the tiny toys to children in worn-torn countries and regions affected by natural disaster. Recently, the RCMP took 800 Izzy Dolls with them to Haiti.

Local organizer Shirley O'Connell says the dolls help to put a smile on children's faces during difficult times, so she's appealing to the public to help get these dolls into the hands of the thousands of Syrian refugee children expected to resettle in Canada by the end of the year.

"I'm hoping that the attention will cause a lot more knitters to be aware that these innocent children are coming into our country and they've been sort of bumped around from place to place, and these little dolls will bring them comfort," said O'Connell, an RCMP widow and grandmother of nine who works with the help of church groups and The International Community for the Relief of Suffering and Starvation (ICROSS Canada).



*Shirley O'Connell is appealing to the knitting community to help make crocheted Izzy Dolls ([www.izzydoll.ca](http://www.izzydoll.ca)) for refugee children when they arrive in Canada. Jean Levac / Ottawa Citizen*

The dolls, which cannot be bought or sold for profit, were inspired by and named after Master Cpl. Mark Isfeld of No. 1 Combat Engineer Regiment who was serving on peacekeeping missions in Kuwait and Croatia in the early 1990s. There, he often came across children with no toys or personal possessions, so his mother, Carol Isfeld, knitted little woollen dolls that he could give away to the kids he met.



*Izzy dolls were inspired by and named after Master Cpl. Mark Isfeld of No. 1 Combat Engineer Regiment who was killed while removing landmines in Croatia. Jean Levac / Ottawa Citizen*

Isfeld was killed in Croatia in 1994 while removing landmines, and his mother has since died. But the legacy of the Izzy dolls lives on.

While in Kabul, Afghanistan, combat engineer Cpl. James Oakley was used to handling dangerous tasks, but a few days before Christmas, his team's mission was to go into a local village and give out Izzy dolls to children.

“At first the children were nervous about approaching us as we came into their village, but once they saw the dolls poking out from the top of the boxes we were carrying, we were all but mobbed by excited young Afghans holding out their little hands, calling out, ‘Mister, mister!’”

Oakley wrote in a testimonial. “Before I realized it, the box was empty and there were dozens of happy little faces milling around, enjoying their new treasures.”



*A Canadian soldier gives an Izzy doll to girls in Afghanistan.*

The dolls — made either as boys with the peacekeepers' UN blue berets or girl dolls with braids and a floppy hat — are to be about six inches tall and kept light so they are easy for soldiers to carry in their pockets. There is a design on the [website](http://www.izzydoll.ca/) (www.izzydoll.ca/) knitters can follow, but volunteers are free to make their own version, too. Typically they are made out of scrap or donated wool and take about three hours to make.

As someone who has knitted several dolls herself, O'Connell says the process can bring on an “overwhelming” sense of emotion, knowing the gesture will cause a ripple effect.

“It’s about the person knitting the doll because to me it speaks for Canadian women. It says we care about the children of the world, we care about the soldiers and health care workers, when they get the dolls there’s always smiles on their faces — and when you are knitting the dolls knowing that all that love is coming from Canada to the children of the world.”



*200 Izzy Dolls ready to be given out.  
Jean Levac / Ottawa Citizen*

[Instructions](http://www.izzydoll.ca/doll/doll) to make the dolls can be found online at [www.izzydoll.ca/doll/doll](http://www.izzydoll.ca/doll/doll). For more information about patterns and information on distributing the dolls, contact O’Connell at [soconn37@gmail.com](mailto:soconn37@gmail.com) or (613) 267-3145.