“It’s a start.” These were some of the last words I said to the very first guest I worked with COAC. We had spent almost an hour working through what was needed to procure a state issued ID. He had no documentation; His previous ID, birth certificate, social security card, and the rest of his wallet had been taken from him some weeks prior to walking through our doors. He was patient with me as I fingered my way down the yes/no flow chart which guides volunteers as to what paperwork would be required by the Department of Driver Services. Together, we figured out that he would need a birth certificate, and proof of his social security number. Fortunately, he was in the selective service registry, which could serve as proof of his social security number. We filled out all of the paperwork the state of New Jersey requires for a copy of his Birth Certificate, and I let him know about the thirty day turnaround time expected with that request. Though his initial reaction revealed some frustration for the delay this would put on his plans, he thanked me as he left. I took a moment and a breath, relieved to have the first one out of the way. “It’s a start,” I thought to myself.

I often find myself in wonder, at how each day at Central OAC feels so familiar and yet, at the same time, radically new. I arrange the chairs in the lobby in the same configuration each morning; I refill the water cooler with four scoops of ice from the ice maker; the entire staff and volunteers meet before the doors open to share joys and concerns and a moment of prayer, every morning. The intake paperwork is the same, most of the questions we ask the guests are the same, our referral partners are the same, and the processes we help our guests navigate rarely ever change. In the midst though, the Spirit moves and new mercies come each day. Most of the guests are new to us when they walk through our doors, bringing their lives in stories and sometimes, in plastic garbage bags and worn out suitcases. The weather is different each day, and our guests often bear the signs of its indifference to their exposure to it. The few hours they spend in the center often aren’t enough to dry out their clothes, or warm the cold from their bones. But we serve them as best as we can; we listen to their stories, and we provide for their needs in that moment, whether it be help obtaining an ID, a referral to one of our partners for clothing, food, healthcare, or job placement, a verification letter for another help agency, or just a safe space where they can find rest, even if only for a minute. There isn’t much we can do once they leave our doors, and so we provide them with hygiene items and a small snack to take with them. It’s not much. But it’s a start.

Just last week, the young man I helped that first day on my own came to pick up his birth certificate and an ID voucher. I recognized him in the lobby and made sure to say hello. He said he finally had everything he needed and was going to go today to get his ID. I let him know how happy I was for him. He told me that he had a job lined up and a lead on an apartment, and that this ID was the last piece of the puzzle. He said, “This is the beginning, man.” Of course he is right. My heart is only beginning to make space for all of the guests I meet each morning, and for the volunteers and staff who I have come to admire. The Spirit is only beginning to move in me as I bear witness to its work in the caring and dedicated service of this center. I am only beginning to understand the impact of this work, the pervasiveness of injustice that make centers like Central necessary, the courage of our guests to come through our doors seeking help and state issued assurance of what should never be questioned, that they are who they are, and that we see them. And it may not seem like much, a voucher, a referral, a toothbrush, a pack of crackers, a phone to make calls on, a place to receive mail, or even just kind words in a moment of need. But then again, I know what Scripture says the Spirit can do with a little. So at the very least, it’s a start.