



**State of Florida
Department of Children and Families**

Ron DeSantis
Governor

Chad Poppell
Secretary

DATE: July 30, 2020
TO: Members of the Southwest Florida Refugee Task Force
FROM: Janet Blair, Refugee Services (RS)
SUBJECT: July 29th Meeting Minutes

THE NEXT TASK FORCE MEETING IS SCHEDULED FOR:

Date: October 28, 2020
Time: 1:00-3:00pm
Location: TBD

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This task force has been active in the South West Florida area for many years. The participants are representatives of various government agencies, private not-for-profit organizations and mutual assistance associations. An average of 20 people attends these meetings on a regular basis. The purpose of these meetings is to increase awareness of the refugee populations, share best practices, build collaborations between agencies, spot trends in refugee populations, characteristics or movements, help create good communication among service providers; get informed about upcoming community events, request for proposals, training, workshops, conferences, etc., at the local, state and national level; discuss refugee program service needs and possible solutions to meeting those needs. Meeting participants also receive updates, information and clarification on new federal and state regulations and policy changes pertaining to refugees. If there are any issues that you would like to include in the agenda, please contact me at the above address.

I look forward to seeing you at the next meeting!

SWFL REFUGEE TASK FORCE MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was held via conference call due to the pandemic. Janet Blair, Community Liaison, represented the Dept. of Children & Families (DCF). Twenty-nine people were present on the call, and the meeting began at 1:00pm.

USCIS Update

Shelly Randall, Field Office Director, gave the update for the Fort Myers USCIS Office. The office is working through a backlog and meeting the need for naturalization ceremonies while adhering to social distancing guidelines. This office has conducted 25 drive up naturalization ceremonies, providing special parking at the front of the building with USCIS representatives coming out to do paperwork and naturalize new citizens in their cars. Additionally, there is an increased number of interviews being conducted each day and the office is opening Friday for interviews. Same-Day naturalization ceremonies are also being conducted (meaning when individuals pass their citizenship test, they can come back that very day to become a citizen). This allows clients to avoid taking time off from work.

Don Jarrell, Community Relations Officer, shared that there is a new email process being established by USCIS for all stakeholders. **Communication with USCIS Community Relations Officers should now be directed to:** TampaDistrictCommunityRelations@uscis.dhs.gov (for Tampa, Fort Myers and West Palm Beach areas). If you wish to be on the USCIS stakeholder list, please email this address and you will be placed on the list and kept abreast of news and updates from USCIS (both local and national). Additionally, Don shared that USCIS is always looking for ways to reach out and interact with the community. Even though we are still in the midst of the pandemic, USCIS has had great success with video conferencing. Although USCIS cannot answer case-specific questions, they can hold general Q&A sessions on how to apply for various benefits, permanent residence, naturalization, how to avoid fraud, etc. Please reach out to Don Jarrell with any ideas on how you might collaborate. Finally, information on the July 28 DACA changes can be found at: <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2020/07/28/department-homeland-security-will-reject-initial-requests-daca-it-weighs-future>

Refugee Services Updates:

Janet Blair shared an update on working with the Social Security Administrative (SSA) Offices in SWFL. All SSA offices statewide continue to be closed to the public. However, we have worked out a process for our clients who are employable to receive new SS cards in order to seek employment. For Sarasota, Fort Myers and Naples this is the process for our employable clients:

1. Complete DCF Form 2275, Verification of SSN Applications for Non-Citizens and/or the Social Security application manually.
2. Gather all immigration documents.
3. Provide a phone number where the client can be reached—each client will need to be interviewed by phone prior to coming into an office.
4. Contact SSA and send all the above documents to the point of contact.

5. A District Manager will call each client to do a health assessment
6. If the client does not have any concerning health issues, an appointment will be set for the client to go into the SSA office for an interview. A job offer or letter from an employer is not needed.

DCF Update:

Denise Garbin, OMCI for the Economic Self Sufficiency (ESS) program, shared the following: Although recipients of TANF cash assistance must participate in work activities, Food Assistance (SNAP) work requirements are suspended through the end of August due to the pandemic. Through August 31, 2020, public benefits will not be terminated for Floridians who do not comply with work requirements. The Governor will coordinate with DCF to reevaluate the implementation of work requirements in the coming months.

Another change to be aware of is the following: For expedited food assistance, interviews are no longer being waived. Providers need to encourage clients to answer the phone and return calls from DCF so that they can complete these interviews in a timely manner. If they are unable to reach the worker directly, clients can call the Call Center.

Lutheran Services Florida (LSF) Updates

Sarasota Office: The Sarasota office is working remotely right now but does have in-person legal appointments on a daily basis. Remote staff are assisting with employment and other client needs by phone and email. The program performance is strong and there are currently over 200 active clients.

Fort Myers Office: The Fort Myers office is open for in-person appointments as well as working with clients remotely. The staff continues to make sure that clients are being served by calling, texting and emailing clients.

Naples Office: The LSF Naples office is open to the public in a limited capacity—there are face-to-face appointments with clients for legal services and benefits applications are available to be picked up, completed and returned. Some staff are working remotely and can do intakes and meet other needs by phone/email.

Additional Updates/Discussion

- Frank Prado, Suncoast Regional Managing Director for DCF, encouraged providers to help clients prepare for the upcoming storm and for hurricane season in general. He pointed out that this year many shelters are trying to implement social distancing and will limit capacity at each shelter, so locating and making a plan to get to shelter will be more complex for those needing to evacuate. Frank urged providers to help prepare clients with basic storm survival kits and supplies.

- Elaine McArthur, Outreach and Education Coordinator of the U.S Equal Employment Opportunity Commission shared that she is available to give presentations to employees or providers. Elaine can be reached by phone at (813) 202-7924 or via email at ELAINE.MCARTHUR@EEOC.GOV
- Professor Jody McBrien from USF Sarasota shared that she is working with Safe Place International to secure grant funding for a program to assist single parent refugee families and LGBTQ refugees in Greece and Turkey. She reminded the task force that these groups experience additional persecution in their home country, while fleeing and once they are resettled.
- David Draper, Community Liaison Manager, thanked task force members for attending the meeting and encouraged all to look at the DCF webpage for updates. He added that when the moratorium on evictions is lifted, we will all need to aware of housing resources in our communities in order to assist clients in need. The Community Liaison unit is working statewide to research housing assistance funds in each community and help providers make linkages.
- Janet also mentioned that Refugee Services staff are working on a multilingual toolkit for parents regarding school reopening and hope to have this available within the next few weeks.

NEXT MEETING: October 28th at 1:00pm, location TBD

CONTACTS: Janet.Blair@myflfamilies.com or David.Draper@myflfamilies.com