



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

Ron DeSantis
Governor

Chad Poppell
Secretary

DATE: April 22, 2020
TO: Members of the Tampa Bay Refugee Task Force
FROM: Janet Blair, Refugee Services (RS)
SUBJECT: **April 21st, 2020 Meeting Minutes**

THE NEXT TASK FORCE MEETING IS SCHEDULED FOR:

Date: August 18th, 2020
Time: 1:30 P.M. – 3:30 P.M.
Location: Main Auditorium, DCF North
Florida Ave, Tampa, FL
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This task force has been active in the Tampa area for many years. The participants are representatives of various government agencies, private not-for-profit organizations, academic institutions and faith community representatives. An average of 50 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 and needs, facilitate strong communication among refugee services and community providers, get informed about upcoming community events, 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!

TAMPA BAY AREA REFUGEE TASK FORCE MINUTES

Mission Statement: Helping Refugees to settle, integrate and thrive through support, education and community.

The meeting was held via conference call. Janet Blair, Ileana Bustelo and Erica Perdomo represented the Department of Children and Families (DCF), Refugee Service Program. A total of **71** individuals were present and the meeting was called to order at 1:32pm.

- Janet Blair opened the meeting with a welcome and did a roll call for introductions by phone.
- The Mental Health Minute was given by Stacy Kratz, Ph.D. The topic for this meeting was dealing with anxiety during this pandemic.

Provider & Community Partner Updates:

- Ileana Bustelo gave the DCF update. She shared information on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) being authorized to be used to shop virtually, that the maximum monthly allotment for SNAP is being given to families to meet the need for food assistance, and that recertifications are automatically extended for 6 months for those scheduled to recertify in April or May. Ileana also shared that there is a new virtual assistant on the DCF website at <https://www.myflfamilies.com/service-programs/access/> and this virtual assistant can help answer frequently asked questions. Languages available for the virtual assistant are English and Spanish. Haitian Creole will be available soon.
- Kristi Miller from Economic Self Sufficiency (ESS) program in the Suncoast Region also added that work requirements were being waived for all SNAP and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients. Kristi also reported that ESS applications are up 170% in this region with Refugee, TANF and expedited cases having increased 250% to 300% since March. The ESS program has added staff to this region from around the state in order to address the backlog of cases.
- The update from Lutheran Services, Florida's (LSF) Comprehensive Refugee Services Program was given by statewide director, Lourdes Mesias. Lourdes shared that all LSF offices are open in the region with limited staff working on site and others working remotely. Clients are seen in the lobby while practicing social distancing and are given paper masks to use for their visit at LSF. In the month of April, LSF has already conducted 50 intakes and has assisted with numerous housing issues—working with both clients and landlords to ensure that rent is paid. The employment program continues to place refugees in essential jobs and also to assist with filing for unemployment. The mentor program is recruiting volunteers who are willing to work virtually with refugee youth. Additionally, LSF is working on virtual orientation classes for refugee clients and using Face Time, phone calls and WhatsApp to stay in communication. One current challenge is the need for tutoring of school age kids now that school is online. Families who are from refugee camps are particularly struggling with this transition. Clients

needing employment, legal, youth or case management services are encouraged to call LSF at 813.877.9303.

- Hillsborough County Schools Adult Education Program—CARIBE: This is a subcontract of LSF and program manager Ron Cruz gave an update. All classes are now being held online for both English as a Second Language and Citizenship. The weekly class schedule has remained the same with morning, evening and Saturday options. Anyone interested in enrolling can contact staff member Iris Lopez at 813.453.9231 or email Caribe_program@outlook.com CARIBE still has a need for technology, not all students have laptops or tablets and smart phones are somewhat limiting. CARIBE does ask that other providers and partners encourage students to continue online classes. Encouragement is particularly needed for low literacy clients. CARIBE Instructors are texting refugee students, preparing videos on how to use Zoom in various languages and attempting to meet student needs for hot spots, internet and technology.
- Gulf Coast Jewish Family & Community Services (GCJFCS) is another subcontract of LSF providing services in Pinellas County. The GCJFCS update was given by Sr Program Manager, Sylvia Acevedo. GCJFCS continues to serve refugees in their programs through both office hours and with staff working remotely. The main needs have been for emergency assistance like food and rent during this pandemic, and for employment. Although some employers have closed and laid off staff, other employers are still hiring. GCJFCS staff has been able to place clients in hospital laundry facilities and other plants that have a high need for workers at this time. The youth program was able to get donated computers and devices to help families struggling with online schooling, however a few more devices are needed. The micro-enterprise program is working with faith-based programs to sew cloth masks for refugee families. Clients needing services are encouraged to contact GCJFCS at 727 253.6538.
- The Hillsborough County Dept of Health was represented by Jylmarie Lewis and Florence Ackey. Those with health questions or concerns were urged to visit the CDC website at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html> which is updated daily. Anyone in need of screening can contact their health care provider or Hillsborough County Health Dept at 813-307-8000. Clients applying for green cards are urged not to get their health dept sealed envelopes too early as this can lead to a denial.
- Hillsborough County Schools K-12 Update was given by Lesleigh Lopez who oversees the English Language Learner's Program. The school system is working daily with families to meet needs and ensure that children are able to participate in online learning for the duration of this school year and for summer programs. An additional 40,000 devices have been placed on order to meet the need. Students who are without technology and/or internet can also pick up hard copy work packets at schools giving out free food. These packets can be returned each week with food pick ups and will provide students with written work for a full week.
- Community partner, Radiant Hands, continues to provide assistance to refugee families with staff working remotely. This agency provides employment linkages, emergency assistance, food drives, tutoring for refugee youth and donations of laptops and other devices. Additionally, Radiant Hands will provide internet hot spots for clients in need and will be conducting an EID toy drive at the end of Ramadan in May. To refer clients for any services, please call Radiant Hands at (813) 983-1700.

- The University of South Florida (USF) was represented by faculty and students from various departments. The College of Medicine launched a new refugee/asylum seeker clinic in February, and it continues to be open one evening per month. This clinic is under the direction of Dr. Lucy Gerra and medical student Grace Benmhend. Telehealth is now also being offered on a HIPPA compliant platform. To make appointments for clients at upcoming clinics, please contact Florence Ackey at 813.356.8273. Additionally, USF's Anthropology Dept. continues to work on a new oral history project and a new cookbook project with Radiant Kitchens as well as translating community resources information into Swahili for clients from the DRC. The College of Public Health and Office of Community Engagement continue to provide access to student volunteers through virtual platforms and to generate information on social media for clients and the general public.
- Step Up for Students was represented by Melissa Jaramillo who shared that scholarships for K-12 students are now being accepted for the 2020-2021 school year. These applications will be open through the middle of June and can be found at <https://www.stepupforstudents.org/>
- Gulf Coast Legal Services was represented by attorney Jacquelyn Bradford who shared that tele appointments for all legal services can be made by calling the main office at 727-821-0726 or visiting the website at <https://gulfcoastlegal.org/>
- The Refugee and Migrant Women's Initiative (RAMWI) is working with community partners to make cloth masks. Those in need can contact them at (727) 900-5292.
- Coptic Orthodox Charities is offering food & mask delivery in Pinellas or Pasco County. Clients in need or partner agencies can contact them at mira.mgalycoc@gmail.com or amirasalamacoc@gmail.com for these deliveries.
- Mission Hills Church continues to provide food, emergency assistance and donations to refugee families in need. Contact Zak Moussa for assistance at 813.431.1365 for services.
- Pioneer Medical Foundation also has masks for distribution and offers online medical appointments. Contact them at (813) 779-6303 for assistance.

Upcoming Tampa Bay Refugee Task Force Meetings/ Committees

Quarterly Meetings: August 18th and Nov. 17th, 1:30pm at the Main Auditorium at the Department of Children & Families, 9393 N Florida Ave Tampa, 33612

Committee Meetings: **Mental Health Team:** Thursday, April 23rd 1:30pm by Zoom
Education Team Meeting: April 28th, 11:00am by Zoom

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