



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

Ron DeSantis
Governor

Chad Poppell
Secretary

DATE: November 23, 2020
TO: Members of the Tampa Bay Refugee Task Force
FROM: Janet Blair, Refugee Services (RS)
SUBJECT: **November 17th, 2020 Meeting Minutes**

THE NEXT TASK FORCE MEETING IS SCHEDULED FOR:

Date: January 26, 2021
Time: 1:30 P.M. – 3:30 P.M.
Location: Microsoft Teams

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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 on Microsoft Teams and Janet Blair, Ileana Bustelo and David Draper represented the Department of Children and Families (DCF), Refugee Service Program. A total of **87** individuals were present and the meeting was called to order at 1:35pm.

- Janet Blair opened the meeting with a welcome and gave an overview of accomplishments this year. David Draper gave an opening regarding the purpose of the meeting.
- The Mental Health Minute was given by Marlene Bloom, Ph.D. The topic for this meeting addressed concerns regarding the mental health of children during this pandemic.

Presentations

- The first presentation was given by Claudia McIvor and Courtney Erickson on the Sew Much Hope Project which started as an outreach of St Mary's Catholic Church and has grown into a for-profit co-op selling items made by refugee women living in Pinellas County. Sew Much Hope sells items at local markets and has an online shop at <https://www.sewmuchhopeproject.com/store.html>. All proceeds go to help the refugee women seamstresses support their families and they also are learning all aspects of the business and participate in all decisions being made. This project is 100% volunteer-run, and the board is considering a merger with RAMWI (Refugee and Migrant Women's Initiative) in the near future to expand the product line at the online shop.
- The second presentation was given by Grace Benmhend from the University of South Florida's College of Medicine and focused on the new free clinic being offered on a monthly basis for refugees and asylum seekers without health insurance or Medicaid. The clinic is run by volunteer physicians and medical students who provide free exams, labs and imaging. Behavioral health assessments & counseling are also now provided by a USF clinical psychologist. The medical team is working with other USF Health colleges (Pharmacy, Physical Therapy, Social Work, Public Health) to form additional partnerships. Grace Benmhend was recognized by the task force during this meeting for her leadership in launching this innovative program.

Provider & Community Partner Updates:

- Update on the Comprehensive Refugee Services Program (CRS) was given by Lutheran Services, Florida (LSF), Gulf Coast Jewish Family & Community Services (GCJFCS) and the Hillsborough County Public Schools Caribe program. The first year of service provision under this CRS contract has gone well with LSF as the DCF contracted provider that subcontracts with both GCJFCS and the Caribe program in order to provide all services in Tampa Bay. Employment and legal services continue to be the most utilized services. The mentoring is up and running on both sides of the bay after a challenging start due to the pandemic and adult education classes in Hillsborough are offered by Caribe in both face-to-face and online formats.

- The Hillsborough County Dept of Health (DOH) is now providing school physicals for refugee families. The DOH on both sides of the bay encourage all to continue adhering to safety precautions for Covid-19 as confirmed cases are on the rise.
- Faith Community Update: **The Tampa Bay Presbytery's** Commission on Church Vitality represented by **Rev. Libby Shannon** was recognized for allocating funds for the Refugee Relief Fund that have now totaled \$100,000. This fund is used to assist refugee families with emergency rent and utilities for the past 3 years and we are grateful for another \$25,000 to continue relief this year. **Rev. Will Wellman** was also recognized for his advocacy and administering of this emergency fund as well as his leadership at **Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church** where he oversees an additional refugee outreach program that provides ongoing support for the refugee community. Rev. **Sally Campbell-Evans** from **Hyde Park United Methodist Church** was recognized for her chairing of the Interfaith Thanksgiving committee that raised \$2600 for grocery gift cards for the families who arrived since December of 2019 until today. Additional faith communities & representatives recognized included **Congregation Beth Am, Radiant Hands, Temple Beth-El and St. Mary's Catholic Church**. We continue to be grateful for strong partnerships with local faith communities.
- USCIS Update: There have been revisions to the citizenship test that will apply as of December 1, 2020. There are also updated policies regarding visa petitions for minors and TPS status for those from South Sudan. All are encouraged to go to <https://www.uscis.gov/> for more information on these and other changes.
- Refugee Services Update: The current presidential allocation of refugee arrivals stands at 15,000 with the current administration anticipating 290,000 arriving as asylum seekers. It is not yet clear if this will remain in place for 2021 or if there will be changes made. The governor has lifted the moratorium on evictions but the CDC order remains in place through the end of the year. Any client that is faced with an eviction notice should seek legal assistance to determine how they might remedy their situation and should also reach out to refugee services providers in order to possibly gain economic assistance through a variety of federal, state and local programs.
- Additional Recognition: Others who were thanked for their work with the Tampa Bay Refugee Task Force at this meeting included: **Greg Musselman** who retired after over 11 years of service at LSF, **Grace Henry** for her work with the mental health committee, **Abby Sterensis, Ghadir Kassab and Claudia Mclvor** for their work on World Refugee Day, **Susan Eckstein and Jill Hekkanan** for their work on both World Refugee Day and the Interfaith Thanksgiving Drive and **The Largo Library**, represented by **Victor Otero** for the virtual donation drive held this year in honor of National Welcoming Week where a total of 41 welcome baskets were collected for refugee families in need. We so appreciate each of these community volunteers and partnering agencies for their ongoing commitment to helping refugees to settle, integrate and thrive in our community!

Upcoming Tampa Bay Refugee Task Force Meetings in 2021

Quarterly Meetings: January 26, April 27, August 31 and December 7 at 1:30pm

Meeting location will be on Microsoft Teams unless otherwise announced

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