



State of Florida
Department of Children and Families

Ron DeSantis
Governor

Shevaun L. Harris
Secretary

MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 14, 2021
TO: Members of the Tallahassee Refugee Task Force
FROM: Theresa Leslie, Refugee Services (RS)
SUBJECT: Task Force Meeting Minutes for September 14, 2021

THE NEXT TASK FORCE MEETING IS SCHEDULED FOR:

Date: December 14, 2021
Time: 10:00 AM to 11:30 PM
Location: Department of Children and Families
Conference Call via TEAMS unless advised otherwise Tallahassee,
Florida 32399
Contact: Theresa Leslie
Office: (850) 778-4065
Cell: (850) 445-4040
E-Mail: Theresa.Leslie@myflfamilies.com

This task force has been active in the Tallahassee area in the past few years. The participants are representatives of various government agencies, private not-for-profit organizations and volunteer groups. An average of about twenty to twenty-five people attend 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, 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.

Mission: Protect the Vulnerable, Promote Strong and Economically Self-Sufficient Families, and Advance Personal and Family Recovery and Resiliency

5920 Arlington Expressway, Jacksonville, Florida 32211

Mission: Work in Partnership with Local Communities to Protect the Vulnerable, Promote Strong and Economically Self-Sufficient Families, and Advance Personal and Family Recovery and Resiliency

TALLAHASSEE AREA REFUGEE TASK FORCE MEETING

INTRODUCTION

The meeting was held via TEAMS conference call with the Department of Children and Families (DCF) Refugee Services (RS). Theresa Leslie called the meeting to order.

David Draper, DCF Refugee Services, provided “Opening Remarks” and reminded the group of the purpose and intent for the local RS Task Force meetings and again thanked them for their on-going participation and commitment to the refugees who reside in this area.

PRESENTATIONS

1. **Terrance Watts** was introduced as the Department’s Community Development Administrator (CDA) in the Northwest Region, Circuit 2. He expressed his appreciation to be able to work in partnership with the Community Liaison and the Refugee Services provider in this area. Mr. Watts explained his main objective was to keep staff closely connected to the many community partners who have been engaged in the mission of the Department for many years and hopefully will bring new partners to join also.

Mr. Watts, who will now head the bi-monthly Community Alliance Meetings, invited the Refugee Task Force members to this meeting to keep current with the other department programs and local agencies and offer their updates and program features to the group.

Mr. Watts will also be attending the many outreach and promotional functions organized by other department staff and local agencies, many of which take place on the weekends. He encouraged the participants to bring refugees to the many health promotion, food and clothing drives taking place all over Tallahassee. He advised joining his mailing list to receive his weekly list of activities and promotions with full details in case you miss them hearing about them in the local news.

Mr. Watts says he will be a strong advocate for the Department’s initiative to encourage the public to use the information, referral, and guidance resources for services and needs for their families with Hope Florida and the Care Navigators who will guide those on the call with clear instructions and support.

2. **International Rescue Committee (IRC) Introduction of New Staff and Program Updates**

David Oliver, the Deputy Director of IRC in Florida, explained that he directs the Miami and Tallahassee’s Refugee Services Program but is housed in Miami. He reported that he and other Miami-located staff, such as Juan (JC) Castro will make frequent trips to Tallahassee and always be available for consultation and support to department and IRC staff.

He reviewed his commitment to making the refugees arrival in Tallahassee as smooth and successful as possible as they partake in the Departments mission as well, especially for self-sufficiency. Mr. Oliver also commented on his previous eight years with IRC in Atlanta, Georgia while working on Housing and Employment of newly arrived refugees.

Juan (JC) Castro, was introduced next as IRC’s staff person in charge of Media Development. He will also participate in IRC’s Community Outreach and Promotion Events and Activities. Mr. Castro explained he will support the Tallahassee Site Manager.

Leann Halsey, Site Manager for IRC's Tallahassee office. Ms. Halsey gave a short background of her experience working with refugees and other groups and explained that she is new to the area and already feels at home meeting clients and working closely with staff, most of which are new hires as well. Ms. Halsey says she and the IRC staff in Miami and Tallahassee will "hit the road running" as this area will soon be accepting new arrivals from Afghanistan.

She explained that facing this humanitarian crisis will take a strong partnership and much cooperation from this Task Force and so many other community partners. She says she has heard that Tallahassee is accepting of refugees and has supported this program over the last ten years. She was anxious to introduce other staff from the Tallahassee office.

Leann Halsey, interim Reception and Placement Program staff person.

Ms. Halsey will be acting in this position until new staff are hired which will work with the newly arriving refugees, mainly those from Afghanistan. This part of Refugee Resettlement and Placement (R&P) is not managed by the Department but fortunately has the experience and capacity to perform this function as well as fulling the DCF's Comprehensive Refugee Services (CRS) portion. She feels certain that by the next Task Force meeting in December she will be able to introduce the new staff in R&P.

Nancy (Shainance) Mkoji, Comprehensive Refugee Services (CRS) Case Manager

Ms. Mkoji has been with IRC for a few years and speaks Swahili which was extremely helpful with the many Congolese that have arrived in Tallahassee. She monitored the existing CRS caseload during the pandemic while ensuring that students were connected and equipped to do their school-work, the parents and other adults were applying for their benefits on time and accurately as to prevent delays, and that all families were following the protocols to stay healthy.

Ms. Mkoji will continue to manage the CRS caseload which will soon include those from Afghanistan who complete the R&P program. She explained she knows the community well and will be able to guide other staff to the many services that are available in the community.

Riley O'Bryant, Housing Specialist for R&P and CRS.

This former AmeriCorp Vista staff person for IRC, Mr. O'Bryant was hired to become the new Housing Specialist which is a program that has its challenges and successes but a perfect fit for him.

Mr. O'Bryant said he grew up in Tallahassee is quickly becoming familiar with the housing options for refugees who arrive without a job, and many are from large families. He was the face of this program to many landlords and faith-based programs to develop the housing options in several areas of Tallahassee. He encouraged faith-based programs to help completely furnish two- and three-bedroom apartments. Ms. Halsey praised the high level of coordination with Mr. O'Bryant and his partners and said this will prove helpful as the many families arrive from Afghanistan in quick succession.

Karen Duncan, IRC Community Resource Development.

Ms. Duncan, also new to IRC but not to this Task Force, as she formerly represented the local Red Cross Chapter and was very familiar with the refugee population and the wide array of resources available in this area.

Ms. Duncan explained she will be very active in the community and will be challenged to meet the needs of the staff and clients. She is planning on making new faith-based partners and introducing herself to IRC's long-time supporters.

She will also be active in recruiting volunteers and interns to help meet the refugees needs.

Karissa Hametta, IRC's Job Development and Employment Specialist and
Mike Morrissey, the AmeriCorps Vista for Employment.

Both Ms. Hametta and Mr. Morrissey, also fairly new to IRC gave their report about canvassing the community for new employment opportunities and introducing themselves to the existing employers that have hired refugees in the past. They reported that they are contacting local government staff for their support also.

They explained that those employers who haven't yet hired refugees seem interested and would like to find a few refugees that know English so they can translate to other staff. This should be successful as this example has worked well in other areas of Florida.

Both Ms. Hametta and Mr. Morrissey contacted Amazon staff regarding the two Fulfillment Centers that are being built in Tallahassee and should be near completion close to the end of 2022. Several hotels and the local hospital are willing to hire refugees in their Housekeeping Department.

Isabelle Frye, AmeriCorps Vista Youth Volunteer/Mentor Coordinator.

Ms. Frye is the other Vista Employee. She explained that it was possible to immediately pick up where the former Vista person left off. She explained her plans on enhancing the program with additional mentors and put effort into using more adults as mentors.

The mentoring program continued during the Pandemic as the mentors were willing to meet students at their homes and even visit outside in their yards. This really helped the students with their schoolwork and gave the youngsters an opportunity for a social visit. Mentors were able to keep current on any mental health issues that became apparent.

Fortunately, none of the refugees in Tallahassee contacted COVID and remained healthy throughout the pandemic.

Ms. Frye appeared optimistic about this program and the youngsters are eager to continue their visits and tutoring with their mentors. She stated that plans are being made for future civic and other social engagements with the mentors once the quarantine is lifted.

3. Karen Strange, Literacy Volunteers and Program Coordinator for the Leroy Collins Public Library

As a Task Force member for over a decade, Ms. Strange provided her informative updates of new activities and availability of literacy volunteers to help those adult refugees that want to improve their English speaking, reading, and writing skills.

She reported that seniors in high school who learned English as their second language often ask for a tutor to help prepare them for their college entrance exams. This hasn't happened often but when it does the volunteer quickly shows up. One young refugee called upon Ms. Strange and requested help to study for his entrance into the Aviation Mechanics Program at Lively Technical School. She reports that he is in his second year in this program.

Ms. Strange reported that new activities to enhance Literacy are continuing to be developed and to call her when special needs arise. She works closely with the Adult and Community Education (ACE) Coordinator when students enroll in both programs. She explains how the Literacy Program and ACE coordinators become enthused when a student wants to reinforce their learning by participating in both. The refugees quickly learn that the better they speak English they can apply for better paying jobs.

Task Force Members were thanked by the Mr. Draper and Ms. Leslie for their input, attention, and on-going commitment to the refugees in Tallahassee working with IRC.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:30 AM

Next Meeting:

Tuesday, December 14, 2021
10:00 to 11:30 AM

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