



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

Ron DeSantis
Governor

Shevaun L. Harris
Secretary

MEMORANDUM

DATE: December 17, 2021
TO: Members of the Tallahassee Refugee Task Force
FROM: Theresa Leslie, Refugee Services (RS)
SUBJECT: Task Force Meeting Minutes for December 14, 2021

THE NEXT TASK FORCE MEETING IS SCHEDULED FOR:

Date: March 8, 2022
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
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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. Mr. Draper also recognized their very diligent hard work this past three months resettling a high number of those from Afghanistan.

PRESENTATIONS

1. **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** reporting on their updates, challenges, and good news.

David Oliver, the Deputy Director of IRC in Florida explained that it is good news that they got through the busiest month ever in November by accepting 44 new arrivals from Afghanistan and a family or two from Syria. With IRC being a somewhat smaller program as compared to the rest of the state this was a whirlwind of activity for staff and community partners.

Mr. Oliver reported that it seems that the December arrivals have slowed a bit but many more Afghans are still plan on arriving in Tallahassee. The holiday period does not promise any slowdown and thankfully staff and interns are eager to continue their resettlement work. Mr. Oliver was excited to report that personal and corporate donations have been plentiful this season which will give IRC some relief with staff shortages and other necessities.

Mr. Oliver wanted to give staff with “boots on the ground” an opportunity to report on their efforts and challenges but thanked the task force members for their continued support and flexibility.

Leann Halsey, Site Manager for IRC’s Tallahassee office did reinforce Mr. Oliver’s comments about the month of November being the busiest she and staff have ever experienced. She said her staff are in good spirits and helping each other when tasks and client services back-up.

Ms. Halsey said that the IRC staff in Miami and Atlanta are quickly reviewing grant opportunities and budget flexibility to see where they are opportunities to add support staff to the case managers. She also mentioned that meeting the health assessment appointments is struggling as the families are large and need to be transported in two vehicles and clients are hesitant to using public transportation. She also reported that staff are major users of IRC’s Language Line and after an exhaustive search of the universities and local Mosque local translators of Dari and Pashto have not been identified.

Leann Halsey, has been acting as the **Interim Reception and Placement Coordinator**. However, she introduced Rose Achar and Rose Lamensdorf are currently in this role with R&P. She reported that both of them are catching on quick to the many important tasks and services that are needed to support the client’s resettlement.

They have been busy doing their intake tasks and helping the clients sign up for their ACCESS benefits, making appointments for their health assessments and immunizations, teaching the clients how to use

public transportation, working with the Leon County Schools Enrollment office to get students enrolled in their appropriate schools, enrolling adult clients in Adult Community Education (ACE) classes, so many resettlement tasks.

They are doing these tasks while being very mindful of the client's mental health status as they all have experienced very stressful situations both currently and before they arrived. The Leon Health Department Social Worker staff and their interns are all meeting many mental health providers who may be available to work with refugee clients and have access to a Language Line translator.

Management and Resource staff are involved with recruiting support staff to help with transportation and training the clients to use their assigned medical provider.

Nancy (Shainance) Mkoji, Comprehensive Refugee Services (CRS) Case Manager reported that she is continuing to make home and office visits with the existing CRS caseload, most of which arrived before the pandemic. She reports that most of the adults are working except for the few that need childcare.

Fortunately, many of the CRS clients were able to work during the Pandemic and some even obtained better paying jobs as their English has improved considerably.

Nancy, David Oliver and Leann reported that they are discussing what staffing changes may be needed when the new arrivals are transferred to the CRS program.

It is anticipated that in January or February a few families may be ready to transition.

Riley O'Bryant, the Housing Specialist is known to work around the clock not only to find suitable and affordable housing but with some support he is furnishing the apartments with all the necessities needed for the families. He is also tasked with shopping for 2 weeks of food for the new families. But as other regions are struggling to find affordable and suitable housing for the refugees, he has managed to locate several housing accommodations. He has developed a suitable list of locations as is finding out that the Syrians and Afghanis like to live close to those from their home country. Ms. Halsey also reports that he had developed some very good relationships with local landlords.

Mr. O'Bryant reports that IRC often uses an Extended Stay Hotel if an apartment or house is not available which has helped tremendously. When an apartment becomes ready, he has learned to act quick before another family signs a lease.

Mr. O'Bryant notices that the refugees are a good support to each other while sharing clothes and extra supplies among the families. Again, knowing some English is proving to be very advantageous.

Karen Duncan, the Community Development Resource Specialist reports that she has a long list of activities and initiatives she is working on strengthening the operations of IRC with volunteers and donors, meet client needs, and connect with new partners. She explained that the community support of the Afghans coming to Tallahassee has been overwhelmingly positive as she now has to limit accepting donations to Monday and Tuesday. And then the same faith-based programs are coming each week with truckloads of furniture and household supplies while submitting articles to the local paper about how this has enhanced their own mission.

Ms. Duncan reports that volunteers are required to get Background Screening clearance if they will work with clients. Ms. Halsey reports that she is an excellent ambassador for refugees and has recruited some critical partners from several venues.

Karissa Hametta, Job Development and Employment Specialist and **Mike Morrissey**, AmeriCorps Vista for Employment report that their contacts with new employers willing to hire refugees has doubled in the last three months.

Isabelle Frye, AmeriCorps Vista Youth Volunteer/Mentor Coordinator reports that she is preparing for additional recruitment of mentors, both students and adults as the new semester begins after the holidays. Becoming a mentor to a refugee student is a very popular volunteer activity among the college students. Ms. Frye is wanting to ensure that the students can hopefully volunteer more than one semester especially as more refugees enroll in school.

Community Partners Members Updates.

Adult and Community Education Coordinator, Catherine Baham, another long- term and supportive task force member reports during the meeting that they have enrolled many more Refugees but are not at capacity for their program yet. Ms. Baham says most of the Afghans and Syrians enrolled in English class have good attendance until they accept a job. Some students have moved up a level since enrolling. Her program anticipates many more refugee students after the new year.

She explains that she will offer the adult students who accept a job the opportunity to attend the night class and connect them also the Library's Literacy Program. She did report that the local bus system, Star Metro is discussing re-instating the evening route that will pick up the evening students at Lively and return them home.

Roseann Schnek, Social Worker at the Leon County Health Department and the coordinator to schedule appointments with IRC clients. She suggested that at our next task force meeting we get a spokesperson from the Language Line to help smooth over some issues with their translation service. Point well taken.

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, March 8, 2022
10:00 to 11:30 AM

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