



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

Ron DeSantis
Governor

Chad Poppell
Secretary

DATE: May 6, 2020
TO: Members of the South West Florida Refugee Task Force
FROM: Janet Blair, Refugee Services (RS)
SUBJECT: April 29th Meeting Minutes

THE NEXT TASK FORCE MEETING IS SCHEDULED FOR:

Date: July 29, 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 15-20 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-one people were present on the call, and the meeting began at 1:05pm.

UPDATES

- **DCF Update:** Denise Garbin and Kristi Miller from the Economic Self Sufficiency (ESS) program, shared the following information:
Policy Updates: There are currently no work requirements for benefits, but clients must still register for employment services. Normally there is a requirement to provide proof of a social security application to receive benefits. However, since the social security office has remained closed, this requirement is being waived on a case by case basis. All clients enrolled in Medicaid on March 19th are remaining open through September. There will be no Medicaid closures.
- Social Security Applications: Lutheran Services, Florida (LSF) staff from Collier and Sarasota shared that they were told by the Social Security Administration (SSA) that brand-new applicants must be seen face-to-face and new applications cannot be sent through the mail. ESS says they had one client who did apply and received the card when documents were sent through the mail. ESS requested that LSF send them any email correspondence they have with SSA indicating that these new applications cannot be processed via mail. LSF will follow up by sending these emails to ESS.
- Workload: Applications to ESS in the Suncoast Region have increased tremendously since mid-March. There is a 170% increase in applications. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) applications have increased by 400%. Staff are being moved around regionally and repurposed to assist with the call center volume. In the past 2 weeks, incoming applications have stabilized. This will hopefully allow ESS workers to start catching up on applications that were submitted in March and April. The typical process time is 6 to 7 days on average and now it is taking longer due to the backlog of cases. However, ESS is working diligently to get caught up and will be faster to respond moving forward.
- LSF's Sarasota office has sent a list of clients that have had ESS cases pending for over a month. Janet has been connecting LSF with ESS to help resolve these cases. ESS is requesting that screenshots be sent to them as well as client name and client case number. These screenshots will help ESS staff identify the case and resolve any issues.

LSF Updates

- **Sarasota Office:** There have continued to be new arrivals in the past 2 months. Staff are also working with clients who are losing jobs. Thankfully, LSF has been able to get jobs for clients and find good placements at places like Walmart, in warehouses, and in local factories making hand sanitizers, etc. Adult education in this area is by voucher only. Manatee County Schools are providing adult education classes online. Legal services have been assisting many clients applying for Legal Permanent Residency (LPR). Clients are coming into the office for signatures only. All clients are being made aware of community resources. LSF staff text information to clients. LSF has also received food donations from a Lutheran church for new arrivals.
- **Fort Myers Office:** The Fort Myers office is operating similarly to the Sarasota office. Staff continue serving clients by appointment in the office. LSF utilizes social distance measures for safety. The Fort Myers office is also seeing an increase in clients applying for LPR's. Staff are also keeping clients informed about community resources and are continuing to assist with benefits applications and other needs.
- **Naples Office:** The Naples office is open daily and receiving clients for services with safety measures in place. Some staff working remotely. The paralegal has daily appointments for LPR applications. Other staff contact clients by calling and texting them. Working remotely has also gone well for all staff in all office locations.

PROVIDER & COMMUNITY UPDATES/ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Melissa Jaramillo from Step Up for Students shared that there are scholarships available and anyone interested should go to www.StepUpForStudents.org to apply.
- Refugee Health Clinics continue to be open. Sharon Patterson from the Collier County Health Department said that they are delaying physicals but registering clients for them. She also said that they have seen very few new arrivals since the pandemic began.
- Don Jarrell of USCIS reported that all offices are closed until June 4th, but this is subject to change. It is best to go to the USCIS website for updates. In preparation for reopening, there is work being done to prepare for adequate social distancing within each location.
- Nirupa Netram of the SWFL Community Foundation announced that their webpage has resources for nonprofits during this time. Go to www.floridacommunity.com for information. She also shared that an immigration learning community meeting will be held via Zoom on May 14th.

- The Health Planning Council of SWFL was represented by Jurnide Jerome who shared that she and other staff are available to provide free, unbiased and confidential assistance to clients who have lost their insurance by helping them with enrolling in federal and state health insurance programs.
- For World Refugee Day this year, a small planning group is forming to plan a webinar scheduled for June 18th to commemorate the day. Representatives from University of South Florida, Lutheran Services, Florida and the SWFL Community Foundation will work on planning the event.

NEXT MEETING: July 29th at 1:00pm, location TBD

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