



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

**Ron DeSantis**  
Governor

**Chad Poppell**  
Secretary

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**DATE:** May 23, 2019  
**TO:** Members of the South West Florida Refugee Task Force  
**FROM:** Janet Blair, Refugee Services (RS)  
**SUBJECT:** May 22nd Meeting Minutes

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**THE NEXT TASK FORCE MEETING IS SCHEDULED FOR:**

**Date:** July 31, 2019  
**Time:** 1:00-3:00pm  
**Location:** Dept. of Health, 2200 Ringling  
Blvd. Room 2063  
Sarasota, FL

**Contact:** Janet Blair  
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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 twenty people attend 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 at the Florida Department of Children & Families 2295 Victoria Ave in Fort Myers.. Janet Blair, Community Liaison, represented the Dept. of Children & Families (DCF). Twenty-six people were present, and the meeting was called to order at 1:04.

### **PRESENTATIONS**

- The first presentation was given by Nirupa Netram from the South West Florida Community Foundation. Nirupa shared facts on immigration for the state and region and also went over the foundation's new grants for immigrant serving agencies and programs. Some of the facts she shared included that 1 in 5 living in the state of Florida is an immigrant and these immigrants hold 91.9 billion in spending power. She also pointed out that in Lee County alone, the public schools report students from 154 countries speaking 134 different languages. In SWFL the county with the highest number of immigrants is Hendry County. Due to the large number of immigrants in SWFL and the lack of legal representation available to them, the Community Foundation established a Land of Opportunity grant funded by individual donors for the first time this year. The grant was awarded last fall and Lutheran Service, Florida's SWFL legal program was one of the 5 recipients. In addition to the funding opportunity, the Foundation has also created a quarterly learning community that meets for networking and forming partnerships. More information on this grant program initiative can be found at <https://landofopportunityfund.org/>
- The second presentation was given by Patrick Eichholtz, Community Reinvestment Community Partnership Relationship Officer at Chase Bank, who presented on the new Suncoast United Way program, Bank On. This program is to assist the unbanked and underbanked population with safe and affordable banking accounts. Bank On is a local coalition working with community stakeholders to educate those being taken advantage of financially by pay day loan institutions and banks with large overdraft fees as well as to inform those who are unbanked of a new option for financial sustainability. Bank On accounts are available at a variety of financial institutions and offer checkless accounts with no overdraft fees that are a safe way to build credit. More information can be found at <https://unitedwaysuncoast.org/what-we-do/income/bank-on-suncoast/>

## **REFUGEE SERVICES UPDATE**

- Janet Blair shared Refugee Services program data for the first half of fiscal year 2019. A total of 284 have arrived in the first half of this fiscal year in the SWFL region. Last year the region only had a total of 396 arrivals for the entire year, so this year we are seeing an increase. The breakdown for arrivals by county is as follows:  
Collier County: 118  
Lee County: 107  
Manatee/Sarasota Counties: 48  
Other Surrounding Counties: 11
- A discussion was also held on outreach to asylum seekers and asylees. The SWFL area is seeing an increase in the Venezuelan population particularly in Manatee County. Working with immigration attorneys, faith communities and other unique outreach strategies were discussed.

## **PROVIDER & COMMUNITY UPDATES**

- Lutheran Services, Florida's SWFL Comprehensive Refugee Services program shared that they have provided services to 1,256 unduplicated clients in the first half of fiscal year 2019. They also shared that in order to cut overhead costs, the Fort Myers and Collier offices have relocated to smaller and more affordable spaces. The Sarasota office remains at the same location.
- Shelly Randall from USCIS shared that the Fort Myers Field Office is almost fully staffed now. At this office location, it is taking an average of 15 months for the adjustment to Legal Permanent Resident status and 13.6 months for processing citizenship applications. By 2020 the goal is to have a 12-month processing time for both types of applications. She also shared that USCIS is looking closely at marriages of minors to ensure they are valid and appropriate candidates for citizenship.
- Denise Garbin from DCF went over the regional office closures occurring in North Port, Naples and Bradenton. Agencies will need to go online to see an updated list of community partners and also locations where authentication can occur in these areas. All information should be updated prior to the closing of the local office and can be found at [www.myflorida.com/accessflorida](http://www.myflorida.com/accessflorida). Users will need to go to the box at the bottom right corner labeled "Find Us", and then to a bullet that says "Search For A Partner Near You" which they will click on. Then they will see community partners listed by county or zip code. Some community partners will only serve their clients, so it is important to find one that is open to the general public.

- Catholic Charities reported that they have 35 Match Grant slots with only 9 filled at this time. They are working with VOLAGS at a national level to see if they can continue to serve the Ukrainian clients arriving in the area.
- Both the Collier and Lee refugee health clinics reported an uptick in arrivals.
- Lee County Public Library staff expressed a desire to partner more closely with refugee serving agencies and the task force.
- Task Force members expressed a desire to hold a Faith Community Summit. Janet will provide assistance and support for this endeavor.

**NEXT MEETING:** July 31st from 1:00-3:00pm in Sarasota

**CONTACTS:** [Janet.Blair@myffamilies.com](mailto:Janet.Blair@myffamilies.com) or [David.Draper@myffamilies.com](mailto:David.Draper@myffamilies.com)