



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

**Rick Scott**  
Governor

**Mike Carroll**  
Secretary

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**DATE:** May 18, 2017  
**TO:** Members of the South West Florida Refugee Task Force  
**FROM:** Janet Blair, Refugee Services (RS)  
**SUBJECT:** April 26, 2017 Meeting Minutes

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

**Date:** June 29, 2017  
**Time:** 1:30-3:30pm  
**Location:** Lee County Public Education Center  
East Entrance, Room 1024  
2855 Colonial Blvd, Fort Myers, Florida 33966

**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 fifteen 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!*

SunCoast Region, 11351 Ulmerton Road, Largo, FL 33778

## SWFL REFUGEE TASK FORCE MEETING MINUTES

This meeting was held at the Florida Department of Health located at 2200 Ringling Blvd in Sarasota, FL. Janet Blair and Tera Bivens represented the Florida Department of Children and Families. Thirty-five people were in attendance for this first meeting in Sarasota County. The meeting was called to order at 1:45pm after we relocated to the auditorium for more space.

### PRESENTATIONS

- The first presentation was given by Sharon Sargent of Suncoast Technical College. With a motto of “prepare for a career in a year” this college offers a wide variety of vocational training opportunities. Classes and training are offered in a variety of locations including the cities of Sarasota, Venice and North Port. Both high school and adult education classes are offered including GED and ESOL classes. Florida residency is required for admission. This program would like to serve more refugee clients. The link for the college website is <http://suncoast.edu/>
- Our second presentation was by Lisa Murray, an attorney at the Bradenton/Sarasota office of Gulf Coast Legal Services. Lisa gave a basic overview of the GCLS programs and services including family law, immigration, a trafficking program and citizenship assistance. The Bradenton Office currently handles the following legal issues: Emergency Services Housing/Eviction/Foreclosure Issues, Domestic Violence Family Law, Elder Law/Senior Services, and Immigration. Naturalization fee waiver forms and N-648 Disability Waiver forms can be completed by GCLS staff as well as citizenship background checks and completion of paperwork. All services are offered free of charge. The link for the website is <http://www.gulfcoastlegal.org/>
- The third presentation was done by Donna Keith from the Florida Department of Health which has refugee clinics in both Sarasota and North Port. A full range of health services are provided at both locations including primary care, immunizations, dental services and a pharmacy. Currently this is a federally qualified health center with mental health services also being offered, however this status will change in a few months. No exams are being done at either location for citizenship and Bradenton now has a 3 month wait for the exam. More information on programs and services can be found on their website at <http://sarasota.floridahealth.gov/programs-and-services/index.html>
- The final presentation was by Tom Melville from the Literacy Council of Sarasota. This program offers GED instruction, ESOL and basic education. Instruction is done in both small groups and in one-on-one tutoring. Largest demand for services is in ESOL. The program also contracts with businesses and schools to provide small classes at these locations. They utilize a program called English Forward which is a research based

system for adult ESOL learners. This program partners with Suncoast Technical College and more details can be found on their website at <http://www.sarasotaliteracy.org/>

## **PROGRAM INFORMATION & UPDATES**

### **United States Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS):**

New green cards and Employment Authorization cards are being rolled out later this month. There is also currently a phone scam targeting immigrants and refugees, where the caller ID shows up as the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and individuals are asked to submit payments by phone. Please make clients aware of this scam and remind them that DHS and USCIS never take any payments by phone.

### **Lutheran Services Florida, CRS Program-Sarasota Office**

This program office currently has 700 active cases with 83% being Cuban. Due to the change in immigration policy with Cuba, the program is starting to see a slowdown in arrival numbers. However, they will be reaching out to previous clients to link them with educational and employment opportunities in order to increase their standard of living. In addition, this office has active volunteers engaging with clients and community groups & faith communities giving donations to new arrivals.

### **Lutheran Services Florida, CRS Program-Fort Myers Office**

An announcement was made on the upcoming World Refugee Day event to be held on Saturday, June 3<sup>rd</sup> at the Golden Gate Community Center in Naples. This free event will run from 10am to 2pm and have food, crafts and kids' activities for refugee families in the area. Several faith community volunteers are working with LSF staff to plan this year's event.

## **REFUGEE SERVICES UPDATE**

Janet reviewed the new meeting schedule for SWFL. Due to the geographic span, task force meetings will now be held in three different locations each year. Two meetings will be in Sarasota, two in Fort Myers and two in Naples. All in attendance agreed that this format is working much better. The next meeting in Sarasota will be on October 25<sup>th</sup> and will be held here at the same location.

Janet also gave a brief overview of National Welcoming Week and there was some discussion about holding an event in Sarasota this year. A sign-up sheet was passed around for those interested in forming a planning committee.

**NEXT MEETING:** Wednesday, June 28<sup>th</sup> from 1:30-3:30pm  
Lee County Public Education Center, East Entrance, Room 1024  
2855 Colonial Blvd, Fort Myers, Florida 33966

**Contacts:** [Janet.Blair@myflfamilies.com](mailto:Janet.Blair@myflfamilies.com) or [Taddese.Fesseheye@myflfamilies.com](mailto:Taddese.Fesseheye@myflfamilies.com)