

## San Diego Refugee Forum

Minutes

Tuesday, May 17th, 2011, 10:30a.m.-12:15p.m.

Springfield College, 5348 University Ave. Suite 100, San Diego, CA 92105

*The parenthetical information at the beginning of each section refers to the time elapsed in the [audio recording](#). Please refer to the [audio file](#) for the full content of the announcement/discussion.*

### **Call to order**

**Present:** Ahmed Ahmed, Abdulahi Aidid, Nawal Alkatib, Dora Arnold, Sheryl Ashley, Celia Balistreri, Bonnie Copland, Kim Forrester, Jacob Gatkuoth, Alex Kahn, Jason Martinez, Eric McDonald, Ayan Mohamed, Abdi Mohamoud, Paulino Paidá, Nadine Pedusseau, John Ramirez, Jamie Regalbuto, Mary Rutland, Ahmed Sahid, James Sly, Dawn-Marie Tol, Mariana Vasconcelos, Mikaela Wallinder, Jeanine Wasson, Michael Wolven, Grace Odyek, Daniel Breuninger, George Demetrion, Gabriel Kendall, Samira Yalda, Anita Solis, Jen Spivey, Heriberto Escamilla (and others).

Total attendance: >45, of whom 10 first-time attendees

### **[0'00"] Introductions & Announcements**

- New attendees included: Dan Breuninger (Laurel Bible Chapel), Lorena Quiroz (Welcome Back Center), Michael Wolven, Gabriel Kendall (211SD), George Demetrion, Jen Spivey (Resounding Joy)
- Somali Family Service will be holding a health fair on June 25<sup>th</sup> at the City Heights library.
- American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) will be holding a free legal clinic on Wednesday, June 15<sup>th</sup> at the Thomas Jefferson Law school. It will run from 5:00pm – 8:30 or 9:00 pm. AILA is holding a national conference in town, so a great many visiting attorneys are volunteering their time to help local immigrants.
- Heriberto Escamilla is interested in recruiting focus group participants to help improve the cultural competency of alcohol and substance-abuse treatment programs statewide. He is also looking for an organization that might be willing to partner with his organization in carrying out.
- Jen Spivey (Resounding Joy) is looking to launch a pilot program regarding music-centered strategies to offer psychosocial support for refugees, and would be interested in discussing a possible 2-4 week partnership with a local refugee-serving organization.
- John Ramirez (USCIS) passed on that an 18-month extension to TPS (temporary protective status) was announced this morning for Haitians who came here following the earthquake. The extension runs until January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013. Also, a 'Ready Lane' has been created that

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allows people to cross the border at Otay Mesa more rapidly than waiting in the existing lines. One of the documents that is valid for the Ready Lane is a special green card with an embedded microchip. He noted that people have been calling in, seeking to replace their own (older) green card with one of the new, embedded-chip green cards – however, by law the earliest a green card can be replaced is 6 months prior to ten years. He warns that if people send in their green card for replacement prior to that timeframe, (a) the request will be rejected, and (b) the application fee will be kept.

- The Alliance for African Assistance is holding a World Refugee Day breakfast on June 20<sup>th</sup> at 8:30 a.m.

### **[13'20"] New Members Welcome**

- Project Concern International

### **Task Force Updates**

#### **[13'40"] Event Planning Task Force**

- The World Refugee Day celebration is taking place on Sunday, June 19<sup>th</sup> at the Museum of Photographic Arts in Balboa Park. Flyers are available, and there is a website about the event at [www.refugeedayevent.org](http://www.refugeedayevent.org). There will be an educational room where organizations can sign up to staff tables and provide publicity about themselves. Interested organizations should sign up via the listserv. There is also a need for volunteers, so a sign-up sheet for volunteers will be passed around as well. The event is free, and allows for admission to the MoPA as well. Please spread the word.

#### **[21'40"] Health Task Force**

- Bonnie Copland and Eric McDonald from the County's public health office discussed the issue of measles outbreaks among the Somali community in Minnesota, and the need to be vigilant to prevent a similar outbreak in San Diego. One of the issues in Minnesota was that immunization rates among the Somali population was extremely low – so Eric and the County want to raise the issue at the SDRF and solicit input about immunization rates in various local refugee communities (not only the Somalis).

#### **[26'10"] Asylum Seekers / Asylees Task Force**

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- Ayan announced that they are planning the next visit to the CCA, and more news will be forthcoming when the date has been set. Ralph invited attendees of the last tour to share their impressions, so Nadine (Catholic Charities) and another participant did so.

### **[30'10"] Employer Relations Task Force**

- Neither co-Chair was present, so James Sly (PCG) spoke for them. The major topics at the previous meeting were interest in holding another International Night of Networking, holding employer workshops, and creating a speakers bureau of individuals who could address local employers to raise awareness of the benefits of hiring refugees.

### **[32'30"] Other Updates**

- Ralph noted that no staff members of local representatives were present to share more information regarding their level of support for the Peters Bill (see April 2011 SDRF meeting minutes), and that he will continue to press them on the matter.

### **[33'25"] Reception & Placement**

- Catholic Charities is expecting ~70-75 new refugees in May. One of the other organizations (AAA?) mentioned that they have ~30 refugees in May, largely Burmese. Nadine noted that projected arrivals for May are at ~70, but if the target for the fiscal year is to be met, Catholic Charities would be resettling something on the order of 150/month.

### **[34'50"] Community Updates**

- Elizabeth Lou (Nile Sisters) mentioned that her organization has been working with members of the Sudanese community on the topic of electoral redistricting. She noted that some refugees were unsure of how participating in redistricting and giving their feedback to the commission might affect their immigration status, but that they have been reassured in this regard.

### **[38'00"] Focus: Housing**

- *Guest Speakers: Suha Talib (Fair Housing Specialist) & Richard Mabutt (Executive Director), both of the Intermountain Fair Housing Council in Boise, Idaho*

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- General introduction, backstory on how IFHC came to be involved with refugee issues in Boise. Noted that Boise is the largest *per capita* resettlement site in the country, with approximately 700 refugees arriving per year.

### [43'00"]

- Richard noted that in any situation where resettlement agencies are bringing refugees into a community, there is potential for the agencies to be directing these refugees to certain locations in a process called 'channeling' or 'steering', which may be in violation of fair housing policies. Several years ago, after the IFHC began providing orientation sessions for refugees on the topic of fair housing at the resettlement agencies' behest, they began to see individuals coming forward to bring suits against the resettlement agencies for violations of fair housing policies. They have seen instances of agencies threatening retaliation if refugees or families 'cause trouble' or 'make waves'.

### [46'20"]

- Suha pointed out that the vocabulary and terminology of leases in Idaho is highly confusing, and leads to issues with translation and interpretation.
- Richard expressed concern that resettlement agencies have been coercing refugees into taking inappropriate jobs so the agencies can then "write them off their books as a success story." He then raised a number of other specific concerns.

### [51'20"]

- Richard paused, and Ralph introduced the next guest speaker from the San Diego Housing Commission, Anita Solís.
- Anita noted that the Housing Commission offers a rental assistance program through Section 8, in which the participants pays 30% of their income for housing. She also mentioned that there are over 1300 affordable housing rental units available through the housing commission to people who meet the income guidelines. Those are posted at [www.sdhc.org](http://www.sdhc.org). There is also a first-time homebuyers program, as well as grants (up to \$3000) for tenants with disabilities to make modifications to their units.
- The Rental Assistance Program has approximately 50,000 people on the list – and it takes 7-10 years to rise to the top of the list. The last time the list was 'purged' (of outdated information) was in 2007, and 20,000 people were removed (out of over 45,000). So it is

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important to notify SDHC if clients relocate away from the Section 8 unit they are currently occupying.

### **[56'00"]**

- The floor is opened for questions.
  - Q: Could you speak a little more on the topic of income limits for eligibility?
  - A: [Handouts with the relevant information are made available]

### **[56'50"]**

- Q: Regarding the \$3,000 grant for tenants with disabilities to make modifications to their units – whose responsibility is that? Seemed according to Anita to be the individual doing this (with SDHC money), but it seemed according to Richard to be the responsibility of the Housing Program.
- A: A private housing provider who receives no federal HUD (Housing and Urban Development) funding is under no obligation to make those modifications. Hence the need for the grant – so that private providers will do this. Anita pointed out that the 1300 units SDHC runs are handicapped-accessible. Richard noted that Boise has nothing analogous to the \$3,000 grants set aside in San Diego.

### **[59'50"]**

- Q: A request for clarification regarding 'purging' of the list.

### **[1:00'40"]**

- Q: The main concern in the community is the duration of the waitlist. Is there anything that can be done about that?
- A: Essentially, no. There are no additional vouchers available at this time.
- Q: Is it a one-time, lifetime service?
- A: No, but if you move out, you must re-apply...and you will be at the bottom of the list.

### **[1:01'50"]**

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- Q: [Largely unintelligible]
- A: The regulation states that no unauthorized residents are permitted to reside in a household. Anita noted that most of the complaints are generated by neighbors and other residents, who then pass them on to SDHC to resolve.
- [Follow-up Q.]
- A: Everyone is entitled to a fair hearing. Mediators from the National Conflict Resolution Center are brought in to facilitate the process, as well.

### **[1:05'20"]**

- Ralph noted that the situation just described places the burden of proof on the Section 8 client to prove that someone is *not* living there, rather than on the Section 8 program to prove that someone *is* living there.
- Anita responded that there is a substantial amount of follow-up which takes place before cases are actually brought, and tenants are instructed to notify landlords of their plans to host visitors, etc.

### **[1:08'15"]**

- Q: The waiting list is at 50,000, which may take 9-10 years to clear. What are the alternative options we should be sharing with people?
- A: Anita noted that there are vacancies available in the 1300 affordable units (which are totally separate from Section 8) that are affordable at various percentages of the Federal poverty income guidelines (50%, 65%, etc.). There is turnover in these units, and there are nearly always vacancies if one is willing to move to different areas of San Diego. There are approximately 14,000 vouchers for the Section 8 housing.

### **[1:11'00"]**

- Q: There are issues with mail being sent that is never delivered, confusion with the post office, etc. Given the language barriers faced by the refugee population, issues such as removing someone from the waiting list because of apparent non-delivery of mail should be reviewed.
- A: There is an administrative review process, whereby the client can make an appeal to the supervisor of the waiting list. Language barriers are not a problem, because

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SDHC contracts with ATT's Language Line. They do sometimes encourage individuals to bring friends along to interpret for them – but the line is always available.

#### **[1:12'55"]**

- Q: Is there a system of 'preferences'?
- A: There *is* a system of preferences, but it is based on time & date of application. There is no emergency housing, however – because *everyone* has emergencies [and it would be impossible to keep up with demand]. But there are preferences *within* a given date & time cohort.

#### **[1:14'20"]**

- Q: Challenge – just because there are '150 languages' in a given language line database does not mean that all the relevant and necessary dialects are available. As a separate matter: a concern that resettlement agencies pushing for home modifications to be made (on behalf of new arrivals who have disabilities or the like) will cause landlords to choose against working with those resettlement agencies.
- A: Richard noted that this is a great question, because in 15 years no resettlement agency has referred a landlord to the IFHC for a housing discrimination issue...whereas the IFHC's research shows that discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in over 50% of housing transactions in their market. So while landlords may not appreciate being held to the flames by organizations such as IFHC or SDHC [as a down-the-line result of working with resettlement agencies], Richard feels it is important that IFHC continue to bring these cases to light to ensure that all housing providers are obeying the law.

#### **[1:17'50"]**

- Q: A note that 'modernizing' SDHC systems (moving to computer- and web-based enrollment programs) essentially discriminates against new arrivals (e.g. given, "from the jungles of Africa") because they have no idea how to access the services.
- A: There are staff at the SDHC who can key in the necessary information and enroll them...but the SDHC naturally prefers that people do it themselves at the website.

#### **[1:20'20"]**

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- Ralph thanked everyone for participating, and noted that time has run out for the Focus. It is time to move to the County Update.

### **[1:21'10"] County Update**

- Kim Forrester (supervisor of the County Refugee Coordinator position, which is still vacant), noted that cases that were improperly denied RCA benefits (see April 2011 SDRF meeting) have been reviewed, and necessary adjustments were made. The bad news was that certain families received overpayments that were turned up by the review process, and those had to be addressed as well.
- A meeting took place with the VOLAG partners a week or so prior, and a handout is being developed that outlines the County's policies with respect to how it treats reception & placement money. This will be provided shortly.
- The hope is that the County Refugee Coordinator position will be filled by the time the next Forum meeting takes place.

### **[1:26'00"] Adjournment**

**Next Meeting: Tuesday, June 21, 2011, 10:30a.m.-12:00p.m. Springfield College  
Focus on Transportation**