



California Children and Families Commission

Roundtable Discussion Meeting Minutes: Refugee and Asylee Services

Southeastern Live Well Center, 5101 Market Street, San Diego, CA 92114

August 21, 2024

Item 1 – Welcome and Opening Remarks

Call to Order: Vice Chair Hazan called the meeting to order at 4:00 p.m.

Roll Call:

Jackie Majors
Vivian Velasco Paz
Amy Bernardino-Fabi

Announcements

- Purpose: To learn more about the journeys of refugee and asylee families; to clarify challenges experienced by this population; and to educate on how to support refugee and asylum-seeking families with children 0–5 at the local, state, and federal levels, in the future.
- Conflict of Interest: None.
- Land Acknowledgement by Executive Director Wong: San Diego is the indigenous, ancestral homeland of the Kumeyaay people.

Item 2 – Roundtable Discussion on Refugee and Asylee Services (Information)

Executive Director Wong provided opening remarks for the roundtable discussion. Director Wong shared First 5 California's (F5CA) North Star and Audacious Goal as it pertains to refugee and asylee children and families ages 0-5. Recently, F5CA dedicated \$3 million in Fiscal Years 2022–24 to coordinate resources, integrate a trauma-informed and healing-centered safe space, and culturally responsive systems for refugee families.

Executive Director Wong introduced Kaley Levitt, Chief of Staff for Jewish Family Services (JFS) of San Diego. Commissioners, stakeholders, and public officials engaged in a roundtable discussion regarding the refugee/asylee younger generation, general eligibility, as well as processing issues and challenges.

Highlights

- There are four general categories of refugees/asylees:
 1. Refugee Resettlement Process: Students and tourists here on Visa but who cannot return to their home country due to fear of their life being in danger are referred to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), a volunteer agency that assists with resettlement, but does not oversee it.
 2. Affirmative Asylum Process: Those fleeing persecution on a valid Visa.
 3. Process for “Arriving” Asylum Seekers: Those fleeing persecution request asylum at the border and are later transported to an immigration detention center to assess credible fear via an interview with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service department (USCIS).
 4. Defensive Asylum Process: Those fleeing persecution whose Visa is expired face Immigration and Customs Enforcement action and are sent to the immigration detention center to assess credible fear of deportation out of the country.
- If asylum is granted, asylees switch to refugee status and have 10 years to interview with USCIS, obtain a social security number, and a work permit. Many newly classified refugees have no idea of entitlement to U.S. benefits.
- In categories C & D, asylees must still complete the asylum application and attend a hearing before an immigration judge. Asylees often encounter issues at the hearing including finding attorneys and proof of evidence due to last minute requests for asylum.
- In the Immigration Detention Center, children are processed separately, usually become “unaccompanied minors,” and end up in foster care. Seventy-five percent experience physical and sexual abuse and give birth or miscarry while in detainment with no pre/post-natal care. Foreign country guardianship paperwork is usually deemed insufficient, i.e. grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc.
- Unaccompanied minors must complete the asylum application and attend the hearing themselves, often without legal representation or translation services.
- The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) attempts to find other agencies to represent the unaccompanied minors.
- The 500+/- page asylum application must be completed in English. Most asylees have English as a second language (ESL). The application costs \$520 with little possibility of a fee waiver.
- Less than 1 percent (approximately 35–65 million people) meet the United Nations definition of a refugee.

- Asylees are told that it takes 18–24 months to get through processing which is not accurate. In many cases it can take much longer.
- Newly classed refugees have 90 days to apply and receive U.S. support and benefits, including finding housing, obtaining social security numbers, education with English as a second language, obtain a work permit, financial aid (based on household size), health insurance and case management. The top four services needed are housing support, case management, health insurance, and education.
- Border Respite Centers like Jewish Family Services (JFS) are here to help but only receive short-term federal funding, so refugees are responsible for themselves and must leave the respite center after 12–24 hours whether they have a sponsor or not. JFS will attempt to contact all sponsors to confirm sponsorship. If those without sponsorship cannot be referred to another respite center (only 3 locations in the U.S.), they will leave on their own free will, but many become homeless and fall through the cracks.
- 99 percent of refugees received by JFS have no idea what sponsorship means and often provide fake contact information. A sponsor must agree to provide housing and financial support for many years to one or more family members. Occasionally, sponsors are red-flagged, and refugees are advised not to travel to the sponsor due to unsafe conditions.
- Current resettlement funding is 50 percent from federal dollars and 50 percent from private donors. Millions in federal funding is available, but budgets go unapproved and respite centers like JFS will not get reimbursed until months later. Funds are either there or not, it is not a gradual decline.
- Schools have minimal resources for refugee/asylee children. Disrupted learning is guaranteed and these children fall drastically behind. Many times, various age groups are lumped together in one class making learning difficult while they hope to get into a school with ESL.
- Most resources focus on adults instead of children. Many gaps are unknown. Known gaps are no legal representation, available attorneys are forced to be social workers, no education or outreach, no capacity to learn and are unaware of the realities, no language services access, lack of referrals, lack of medical services, asylum phone applications are not accessible and there are many glitches causing denial without appeal, and the technology to help complete employment applications.

Item 3 – Public Comment (Information)

None.

Item 4 – Adjournment (Action)

Call to Motion: Vice Chair Hazan called a motion to adjourn the meeting. Jackie Majors seconded. Motion passed. Meeting adjourned at 5:15 PM PST.