

City of Alexandria, Virginia
Department of Community and Human Services
Social Service Advisory Board Meeting Notes
December 16, 2024

Present: Ashley Caison, Abby Curran Horrell (Chair), Samantha Pedrosa (Vice Chair), Karen Carter, Allison Greenleaf, Josh Barnathan, Shawna Gary, Michael de La Guardia, Jordan Nally, Angela Almonte (DCHS Staff), Lesa Gilbert (DCHS Staff), Esperita Bullard (DCHS Staff), Laurel Collins (Catholic Charities), George McKinney (Catholic Charities)

Absent: Ann O' Hanlon, Maura Miller

Call to Order/Welcome:

The meeting was called to order by Abby Horrell (Chair) at 7:00 p.m. and SSAB members were welcomed to the December meeting.

Guest Speaker Catholic Charities George McKinney and Laurel Collins:

- The speakers shared an overview of their organization's history, noting that the Catholic Diocese of Arlington has been involved in refugee resettlement efforts since 1975 and continues to provide refugee resettlement services.

Local Resettlement Efforts and Statistics:

- Data for the fiscal year indicated a steady number of arrivals, with the majority being Afghan refugees and SIV holders.
 - The numbers presented showed the total number of individuals resettled by various agencies, including Lutheran Social Services, the Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC), Dar Al-Hijra Refugee Services, and React DC.
 - Specific statistics for Alexandria City indicated that 123 individuals resettled through Catholic Charities and 69 through React DC. The data also reflected the prevalence of Afghan resettlement in the region.

Eligibility for Services:

- Services are available free of charge to individuals with legal status, such as refugees, asylum seekers, or SIV holders.
 - Individuals must be within five years of their arrival in the U.S. to qualify for services.
 - Refugees are individuals forced to flee their country due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, or political opinion.
 - These individuals cannot return to their country of origin due to ongoing threats, and their status is recognized internationally.
 - Asylees are individuals who have applied for asylum within the U.S. and have gone through the U.S. legal process, proving their need for protection.
 - Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) for individuals who served as allies to U.S. forces, particularly from Afghanistan and Iraq.

Services provided:

Case Management and Early Support Services

- Resettled refugees and asylees receive intensive case management during the first 30 to 90 days of arrival.
 - During this period, refugees are greeted at the airport, assisted with finding housing, and helped enroll in public benefits such as SNAP and Medicaid.
 - Caseworkers conduct assessments to determine language skills and areas of need, facilitating the transition process for the newcomers.
 - Refugees receive a one-time cash allowance of \$1,425 to assist with immediate needs. By the end of the first 90 days, individuals are expected to be employed.
 - Resettlement agencies, in partnership with organizations like Brite Path, provide financial literacy training. This includes educating clients on budgeting, banking, taxes, credit building, and understanding paychecks.

Employment Services

- The employment services offered include job placements, workforce development, and career counseling.
 - Employment services are provided for up to five years from the individual's arrival or grant of asylum.
 - The employment team provides pre-employment training, which includes crafting a U.S.-style resume, mock interviews, job search strategies, updating LinkedIn profiles, networking, and developing employment-based skills. Employment specialists work closely with the local Workforce Development Center (WDC) to ensure continuous support for career development.

Public Benefits Support

- Public benefits such as TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), and Medicaid are essential in the early stages of resettlement. Case managers support individuals applying for public benefits.
 - School registration is a requirement for TANF benefits, but the process can be slow. Children need physical exams, immunizations, and refugee health screenings before they can attend school. Though not the fault of the refugees, these delays can result in a delay in receiving TANF benefits.

Refugee Health Education Outreach Program

- Specialists assist clients with health screenings and provide extra support services for refugees with special needs, disabilities, or those experiencing trauma.

Youth Mentoring Program

- The youth mentoring program aims to help young refugees (ages 15-24) navigate their new lives in the U.S. and plan for college.

Virtual Resettlement Program

- The Virtual Reception and Placement (R&P) program was created in response to past challenges and provides a remote resettlement option for refugees, primarily those in the SIV program. Once refugees are resettled through the R&P program, they are eligible for similar support to those who have gone through the brick-and-mortar resettlement agencies for 90 days.

Partner Collaboration

- Regional resettlement agencies meet quarterly to share updates, review refugee trends, and coordinate support efforts. These hybrid meetings (both in person and via Zoom) involve local municipalities, schools, community groups, and volunteers.

Ways to support:

- SSAB members were invited to sign up for the quarterly meeting mailing list.
- The agency heavily relies on volunteers and welcomes the SSAB members to volunteer.
 - Volunteers help in many aspects, including transportation, housing support, and offering services like English language training.
- SSAB Chair Abby Curran Horrell will share the PowerPoint presentation and contact information with the board members.

Approval of minutes: The minutes of the December meeting were approved with no changes by SSAB members.

Boards and Commissions Chair meeting update:

- SSAB board member Josh Barnathan highlighted that the budget for the year was a primary topic of discussion in the meeting. The City Manager has asked each department to find areas to increase efficiency. Several public budget meetings will be held where community members can provide feedback on various issues.
- An additional topic of discussion was the legislative priorities that were compiled and that were being sent to Richmond in the coming weeks. SSAB members agreed to monitor the situation and look for any updates on meetings regarding legislative priorities to stay informed.
- A brief update about the ARISE program was also provided during the meeting.

Updates on the letter to the City Council regarding City employees:

- SSAB Chair Abby Curran Horrell shared that Councilmember Sarah Bagley's office responded regarding the letter that was sent. The office and SSAB Chair are in the process of scheduling a meeting with Councilwoman Sarah Bagley.
- A response was received from Gaskins' office, but no direct commitment to further engagement.

Elections for New Chair and Vice Chair

- The floor was opened for nominations for the position of Chair and Vice-Chair. SSAB member Josh Barnathan was nominated and unanimously elected to serve as Chair.
- SSAB member Karen Carter was nominated and unanimously elected as Vice-Chair.

Next Meeting Date:

- Monday, January 27th.
- For February, SSAB members decided to revisit the date during the next meeting to accommodate the Presidents' Day holiday.

Meeting adjourned at 8:16 pm.