

RAMP minutes 9/24/19 General Meeting

Tom Lewis introduced guest speakers: Alison Millan with International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Meghan Johnson with Church World Services (CWS).

Global refugee Issue: UN Commission says over 70.8 million individuals are currently displaced. For the last 30 years, the US has been the leader in accepting refugees. There are approx. 35 countries with formal resettlement policies; in 2019 Canada displaced the US as the global leader.

National Refugee Issue: The US is waiting this week for the announcement of the annual refugee allotment for the year. CWS anticipates a ceiling of 8-12K refugees. Historically, this number has been 90K and this year it is set at 30K. We are already at that quota and current refugees are cancelling their arrival plans. It was suggested that attendees could call their representatives about the Grace Act that would set a minimum floor of 95K.

National Asylum Seekers Issue: Asylum seekers are processed at the federal level through Dept of Homeland Security. Current asylum ban is active on those who did not previously seek asylum (and be rejected) in another country because we have such a huge backlog in asylum cases. Backlog not an incentive to make things go faster because of contracts with private detention facilities. Housed in dorms of 40 people, don't get to go outside. No access to medical care within the facilities. Too scared to request help. Dehumanizing process.

Local Refugee Issue: The State Dept has discretion as to which agencies they fund for resettlement work and last year, NJ saw a decline from 4 to 2 agencies. CWS lost their funding. For the first time the federal gov't is also considering a policy in which state gov't's have to give permission to have refugees resettled within their borders. If states can reject resettlement, NJ may accept more if other states shut down their programs. With our current state gov't this is unlikely to be an issue.

IRC Resettlement Work

IRC resettles in the northern part of NJ, another group resettles in the south. This year IRC will have resettled 250 individuals from the Congo; Afghanistan and Central America. Most families are placed in Union County; however, some are placed in Morris, Essex and Bergen. IRC provides family support for up to 5 years after arrival. Most services are centered in and around Elizabeth. The staff is 20 onsite in Elizabeth.

CWS Resettlement and Asylum Work

Agencies don't want to shut down and try to re-start when things get better so CWS chose to remain open. They offer support services for 5 years and have added various coaching services to help those who have been here for 1+ years (for example, help getting a loan or moving up the career ladder.) CWS has also been working with individuals who have been granted asylum, particularly those from the Elizabeth Detention Center. CWS has almost doubled in size, helping almost 250 asylum clients this year. Many clients are African. Clients are not granted attorney representation, but the Governor just approved an increase in funding for this type of attorney. CWS provides temporary housing, case mgmt. and employment services. They are essentially doing the same thing for asylum seekers as they were doing for refugees.

Audience Questions

1.) How should we respond to people who say that people aren't really refugees, they're just posing as that to get in here easier? Answer: It takes at a minimum, 2 years to become a refugee because of all the background checks. It's not an easy program – it's more restrictive than any other means of entering the US. Refugees are vetted overseas, we fact check their applications. Now there are even more layers of security checks which have made it much harder. Even for asylum seekers, they have to prove their case very strenuously. Cases are denied easily. The Refugee Council USA has talking points to refute ignorance.

2.) How can we remedy the dehumanization of detention centers? Visitors make a big difference. First Friends run a visitation program. Detainees like receiving letters; CWS provides them with stamps or gives them money to buy supplemental food. Volunteers can also be there to pick them up.

3.) Is there a need to fund green card lawyer fees? It is great to have financial aid for families in this process. Refugees pay a lawyer and medical screening, asylum seekers have extra fees to pay costing \$1500.

4.) What is it like to relocate in Morris County? There are 3 other families with relatives here but, IRC wasn't able to find affordable housing. The advantages of Morris County are good schools and abundant healthcare facilities but it is expensive. Without an organization like RAMP it's not possible to live here.

5.) What is the status of the movement to deny green cards to those who have received social services? The desire to discourage newcomers on Public Charge has existed in the past but has never been enforced. This new policy appears to make it harder, but refugees and those with similar status are exempt. That doesn't mean we haven't seen people who believe differently and don't want to access benefits. They can decline benefits they really need out of fear and misunderstanding.

RAMP Family Update

- Tarakji Update: The family moved to Wharton and live in a home owned by Adnan's boss. All three are working to make the rent. The children are in school and they can walk. This family has been more difficult but now that they are speaking the language; they're able to be on their own.
- Muniri Update: The mother's English skills are good and the father has a good job. The 4 year old boy is in pre school. They are assisting the next Afghan family that arrives soon.
- Mashal Update: They are here almost a year and doing fairly well except for the problem of getting Fahim a good job. He's driving a truck part time making overnight deliveries and going to county college. Noor's English is improving and she is signed up for ESL classes while we tutor her up to 4 days a week. She is close to taking her driving test. Fahim is a good speaker about Afghanistan Then and Now. He is interested in speaking at one of our programs.

- **New family Update:** A young couple arrived in June and has moved ahead at great speed. They are awaiting their green cards. She is pregnant and due in January. She just got a drivers license and they are living in Madison near the train station and shopping. The father is an IT guy with job offers but he needs a green card.
- **Arrival Update:** The “5th family” is an individual named Hashmat. He will be met at the airport Thursday morning and will live in Parsippany. Akhtar Muniri and Mark will help him from RAMP. RAMP is looking for someone to work with Mary Ellen to assist in social services. We need men to volunteer to show him how grocery stores work, help him find seasonal clothing and take him to a medical appointment at the free clinic in Passaic. His English should be okay and RAMP is working on employment.

Finance Report: Leo RAMP’s finances are fine. The Steering Committee is making a determination if we need a new fundraising campaign.

Communication: RAMP will now have a newsletter that comes out on regular basis to keep members engaged.