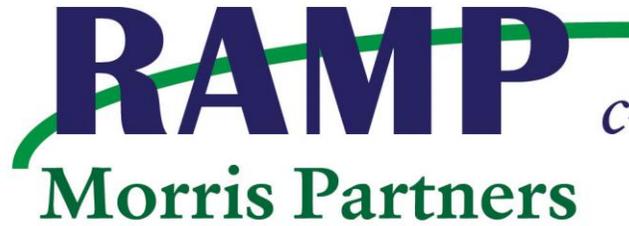


Refugee Assistance



*A Bridge to Assist People to
Cross From One Life to Another*

GENERAL MEETING MINUTES

February 26, 2019

The meeting convened shortly after 7:00 pm.

Attendance: Dave Sullivan, Marie Pfeifer, Chris Shuette, Tom Graham, Carol Grahm, Kirk Nixon, Sue Nixon, Juanita Saco, Charlie Saco, Mary Gately, Diane Marks, Tina Genest, Bonnie Gardener, Rebecca Means, Charles Courtney, Debora Duke, Lee Higgs, Mary Gannon, Gerry Gannon, Patrick and Cheryl Moletteri and Victor Salama (First Friends).

Special Guest: Victor Salama, Executive Director, [First Friends NJ/NY](#)

Gerry Gannon introduced special guest, Victor Salama, executive director of First Friends NJ/NY, [firstfriendsnjny.org](#).

Victor described the work of First Friends with asylum seekers in detention centers in Hudson, Bergen and Essex Counties and Elizabeth. When asylum seekers are released from the detention centers, First Friends volunteers pick them up, provide housing for the short-term, then work to locate them where they can continue their path to living in the U.S. There are some 2,200 detainees in these centers. First Friends helps when asylum seekers have been released on bond or when their plea to remain in the U.S. has been approved in the courts.

First Friends also has volunteers who meet with the asylum seekers while they are still in detainment to provide comfort, counsel and companionship and to establish a relationship that will be helpful when they are released. The organization has a staff of four. Other programs they run included putting Stamp Out Despair folders that contain helpful resources, a Pen Pal program and a bond fund of \$100,000. They also seek to find employment opportunities for the asylum seekers and they provide phone cards and used cell phones.

The asylum seekers come from all over the world and most in detention are men 18-30 years old. They may have families here or back home. Last year in the Bergen Detention Center, 51 countries were represented. There were 295 volunteer visits with 384 detainees totaling 1,137 hours.

First Friends helps asylum seekers get documents that give them the right to work and thereby be able to access government benefits.

Victor said First Friends would like to establish relationships with organizations such as RAMP so that we can help with the next leg of the asylum seekers' journey.

Discussion after the presentation

Comments and suggestions

- RAMP could be a conduit to the needs of First Friends.
- We might provide transitional housing, perhaps in a home or apartment owned or rented by RAMP that would house three to four people.
- We could approach this in stages, e.g., take someone who has stayed briefly in a First Friends volunteer's home then put that person in the longer-term RAMP process.
- We should only take people who have been granted asylum (i.e., not those out on bond) and when we have knowledge of what government benefits they are entitled to.
- One advantage we have had is we have known the cultural background of the people RAMP has supported. We could only take people who fit what we do.
- Possibly we could use the housing some of our member religious orders have.

Our next step in deciding which direction RAMP should take, that is (1) becoming involved in serving the needs of asylum seekers through First Friends, (2) continuing to serve the refugee families, through the International Rescue Committee (IRC) or (3) a combination of both. Gerry announced that the next general meeting will consist of a presentation by the International Refugee Committee. After hearing from the IRC, we will be in a better position to decide on the future direction of RAMP.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday, March 26th at St, Peter's at 7 P.M.

The meeting adjourned shortly before 9:00 p.m.

Minutes taken by Dave Sullivan