

# *Providing Coordinated Human Services to Refugees and Immigrants through Specialized Service Units*

## **Questions and Answers**

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*This Webinar was hosted by the Office of Refugee Resettlement on September 19, 2013. The answers below were provided by the Webinar presenter Mr. Tom Medina, who serves as the Washington State Refugee Coordinator in the Department of Social and Health Services where he is the Chief of the Office of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (ORIA).*

**Question:** How long can a family receive the State family assistance?

**Answer:** State family assistance is a mirror to the federal TANF program so it has the same time limits. It is a five-year time limit.

**Question:** What were the types of skills training provided?

**Answer:** There are three classes: building maintenance, electronic assembly, and a nursing assistance class.

**Question:** What industries and job titles were utilized in the subsidized employment?

**Answer:** Examples of employers include Goodwill, Everett Community College, Somali Community Services Coalition, Clark County Corrections, Trinity Childcare, Hilton Hotel, Empower Up, Amana Housewares and Groceries, Eagle Beverage & Accessories Products, and G & K Services. Job titles include cashier, custodian, office worker, house cleaner, and refurbish used electronics.

**Question:** What is the time period of eligibility for refugees in these programs -- i.e. Three years post-arrival? Five years?

**Answer:** The time period for the Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Pathway program is five years.

**Question:** Have you collected client satisfaction surveys? If yes, what have been the results?

**Answer:** No, we have not. We have talked about that and it is on our radar screen. I would really love to do that. We have Community Conversations where we want to talk to the refugees that we are serving to discuss their experiences with our services. Preliminarily, we have discussed that we want to be careful because we want to engage the refugees in a way where they are willing to share what they really feel and not tell us what they think we want them to say.

**Question:** Can you elaborate on the mental health services you provide?

**Answer:** We only have three small contracts in Keen County for mental health. The program was started with some State funding and we want to expand it but have not had the wherewithal to do it yet. Program participants can also access mental health services through Medicaid or Refugee Medical Assistance if they receive it.

We are also leveraging partnerships with voluntary refugee resettlement agencies (VOLAGs) to help mental health providers in our resettlement areas enhance their services for refugees. For example, we facilitated conversations between Spokane Mental Health and World Relief (VOLAG) to help the mental health providers better understand refugees and the resettlement process.

**Question:** What component of the Basic Food Employment and Training (BFET) do you think led to the fairly high initial wage of \$10/hour? Is that a high wage for Washington State? What is the average starting wage for refugees?

**Answer:** The average is about \$9.75 for the LEP Pathway program. We have a very high minimum wage here. It is over \$9.00 an hour so that helps drive up the initial wage. Our providers also have a lot of close ties with businesses in the community.

**Question:** When refugees on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) participate in the intensive English as a Second Language (ESL) program, how do they meet the TANF employment requirements?

**Answer:** There are two ways. Since it is a standalone activity you can count that as life skills training under the job search requirements or part of the job search activity that is allowed by the Federal government. It is either six or 12 weeks out of the year depending on whether your State is a high-need State or not. In our case, we decided not to count them as participation and we worked through the Governor's Office to get buyoff to do that because it was just a small set of people. Now as we grow that program that might be more of an issue. If there are enough labor market topics in the ESL context, you can actually look at it as job skill training for employment which is a non-core activity and stack it with other core activities. We did not do that with the intensive ESL. We just decided that we were not going to count it as participation since it was a pilot.

**Question:** Do VOLAGs provide employment training?

**Answer:** Yes, they do. They are a big part of our service delivery network. That is important because when refugees arrive they develop a tie to the organization that resettled them and it helps ensure coordination of those services. They are a big employment provider.

**Question:** For how long did skills training classes last?

**Answer:** The skills training programs at community-based organizations went from April through June so it lasted three months. The skills training from the community college started in July and went through August so it was an eight-week training course.

**Question:** How did you determine the three areas of skills training?

**Answer:** When we issued the request for proposal, we required the proposers to do some research in the community and justify their proposals because we wanted to make sure that employers in the area were seeking employees with the skills taught during the skills training. It was a competitive procurement process, so evaluators also reviewed the proposals.

**Question:** Does your office determine eligibility and make payments for TANF Basic Cash Assistance?

**Answer:** Our office does not but our division does. ORIA is part of the Community Services Division and we have 62 Community Services offices throughout the State where people come in and apply for public assistance benefits. Our policy folks determine eligibility and are in our division and sit across the hall from me, which facilitates coordination and enables me to walk across the hall to discuss eligibility requirements with them.

**Question:** Do you have an outcome measure for ESL and job readiness programs beyond work participation rates?

**Answer:** For ESL, we use the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) test. Lower scores indicate lower English proficiency and higher scores indicate higher proficiency. If participants score between levels one and six, then they are eligible for LEP Pathway services. For a client to advance from one level to the next, he/she has to pass certain sublevels in reading, listening, and writing skills so there are different measures within each level.

In terms of job readiness, we have not established any kind of measure of job readiness but I wish we could.

**Question:** Of the people who did not find jobs, what are the reasons or common themes as to why they did not find jobs? Training, any barriers, et cetera?

**Answer:** That is a hard question to answer because there are so many folks that are trying to get work. Lack of familiarity with the U.S. labor market, lack of education, lack of English proficiency, lack of a skill set that lends itself to employment in the U.S., and cultural differences are major barriers. But, in terms of the long-term, many refugees are eager to obtain employment, so our case managers love working with them.

**Question:** Do you have a goal of minimum hours per week to count as a successful job placement? 30? 40? How is economic self-sufficiency measured? Is there a requirement for income level to consider it a successful job placement? Or could it be any job with any number of hours?

**Answer:** No, and that is a really good question. One of the things that our Refugee Advisory Council is doing now is trying to define self-sufficiency. In Keen County, the University of Washington developed a self-sufficiency calculator and determined that people need to earn between \$15-\$20 dollars/hour to be considered self-sufficient. That is out of reach at entry for a lot of our TANF refugees.

I know ORR looks at self-sufficiency as being able to keep a roof over your head and not be eligible for public assistance. That is a good start in my mind but I do not know that that would be self-sufficient. I do not know what self-sufficiency looks like and I think it looks different to different people. We have not set a benchmark for it.

**Question:** How long is the intensive ESL class per day and how long is the entire course?

**Answer:** Intensive ESL is four days a week at five hours a day, so it is 20 hours a week. It was a one quarter course. The reason why the ESL class was four days a week is because newly arrived refugees have a lot of appointments, so we wanted them to have a day for appointments.

We would like to take another run at the intensive ESL and re-implement a project based on feedback we received from the clients. For example, some clients commented that five hours per class was too long while other clients commented that they wanted more than one day a week for appointments. We would like to put that all together and figure out how to structure the next iteration of the program based on those preferences.

**Question:** Do clients receive cash assistance or other additional benefits when they are enrolled and/or participating in the LEP Pathway program?

**Answer:** The program started with all TANF participants but has been expanded to include some Refugee Cash Assistance clients. They are all getting benefits of some sort when they are enrolled in the class.

**Question:** Can you briefly explain how the subsidized employment works? Does the employer use the TANF money as a paycheck?

**Answer:** The State Department of Commerce operates the subsidized employment program and essentially takes a TANF grant and turns it into a paycheck. The employer provides the participants a check using the TANF money so it is just like a real job even though it is subsidized.