

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

Webinar Transcript

September 19, 2013

Coordinator: Welcome and thank you for standing by. All participants on the phone line will be on a listen-only line for the duration of today's conference call. Today's conference is being recorded. If you have any objections you may disconnect at this time. I would like to go ahead and turn the call over to your host for today, Makda Belay. You may begin.

Makda Belay: Hello everyone, and welcome to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) Webinar, *Providing Coordinated Human Services to Refugees and Immigrants through Specialized Service Units*. My name is Makda Belay and I work for the Office of Refugee Resettlement. We are pleased to offer today's Webinar as part of our ongoing technical assistance (TA) to refugee programs. I will now turn it over to Louisa Jones and Ellen Simon of ICF International to run poll question and discuss how to submit questions throughout the webinar. They will also introduce our speaker for today's Webinar. Thank you.

Louisa Jones: Thank you. I am Louisa Jones from ICF International and we support ORR's Bridges for Refugees Project. Bridges is an ORR-funded TA initiative to help refugee service providers develop robust relationships with federal, State, and community-based partners, especially related to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF, program and workforce development. This Webinar is one in a series focusing on that subject.

Before we get started with introductions, our presenter wanted to know a little information about our attendees so he can best address the needs of Webinar participants and enhancing their current or future services provided by refugee agencies and organization and other partners with TANF agencies. We are going to open poll questions for your feedback right now so that our presenter know a little bit more about who is joining the webinar and I will turn it over to Ellen Simon who will read off the poll questions.

Ellen Simon: Good afternoon. The first question is what agency or organization do you work for? The options listed are ORR, TANF, other social service agency, and nonprofit vendor. Thank you. Now we will move on to the next poll question.

What stage of collaboration are you in in your State or local area on collaboration between TANF and refugees? The options are: we have had initial conversations and we share basic information and resources; we have some

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assets or services of our State local agencies that are connected; our State local agencies have an integrated approach to connecting refugees with TANF services; and, we have TANF policies that accommodate refugees. We will just wait a few more seconds for a few more folks to respond. Thank you everyone. Now we will move on to the third poll question.

What is the largest barrier to collaboration between agencies and organizations serving refugees if applicable? The first option is: forming partnerships across agencies and organizations. The second choice is: addressing language needs assessment through education and training. The third option is: navigating fiscal funding stream. The fourth option is: finding employment training opportunities. The fifth option is: TANF policies around grant levels, income disregard, time limits, and allowable activities which are unfavorable to refugees. We will give folks a few more seconds to respond.

Now we will move on to the fourth poll question: do you provide services to refugees through a specialized service unit? The first option is yes and the second option is no. Thank you everyone for responding. Throughout the Webinar you may submit questions through the question-and-answer submission form on the Webinar platform. We will also be sharing a PowerPoint transcript and audio files from this webinar in the upcoming weeks on the ORR Web site and through the Welfare Pure Technical Assistance Network Web site.

We are joined on this webinar today by Tom Medina from Washington State. Tom Medina currently serves as the Washington State Refugee Coordinator. Mr. Medina works in the Department of Social and Health Services where he is the Chief of the Office of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (ORIA). ORIA administers services for refugees and immigrants throughout Washington to promote economic self-sufficiency. Mr. Medina began his career in state service as an eligibility worker for public assistance programs over 24 years ago. After working in the field for seven years, he transferred to DSHS headquarters where he worked as a public welfare policy analyst and as the supervisor of the policy development unit and the economic services administration in DSHS. Mr. Medina has a Bachelor of Arts degree in anthropology from Washington State University. And now I would like to turn it over to Mr. Medina.

Tom Medina: Thank you and welcome everyone. Thanks for joining us today. First of all, let me start out by saying thank you to the Office of Refugee Resettlement and ICF International for providing an opportunity for me to talk about Washington State services for refugees and immigrants. I am going to talk not just about our service delivery system but a little bit about how our strategic partnerships have helped us strengthen programs and services to help the refugees and immigrants that we serve.

ORIA is part of the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) as was mentioned earlier. I want to give you some context so I want to start out with some information on the organization. DSHS is a large social service agency that employs about 16,000 staff to provide a variety of services for Washington State's residents and needs. This includes services that help people meet basic needs as well as services to address serious family issues.

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If you look at our mission statement, our mission is to improve the safety and health of individuals, families, and communities by providing leadership and establishing and participating in partnerships. I want to emphasize the partnership piece. DSHS recognizes that no single program or agency alone can effectively impact the social issues that touch residents of our communities. We rely on partners in the community and other State and federal agencies to help us reach our goals. Now ORIA manages the refugee assistance program with our federal partners like the Office of Refugee Resettlement and the U.S. Department of State. Our program is a State-administered program. As many of you probably know, in some States there is a different system and, in some States, counties manage the program and in other States voluntary refugee resettlement agencies (VOLAGs) manage the program. I have not worked in any of those systems but I like having a State-administered program because it helps us ensure that delivery of services to refugees is consistent throughout the State.

ORIA, or the Office of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance—we call it ORIA, is located in the Community Services Division in DSHS. The Community Services Division (CSD) administers cash, food, and medical assistance program for needy individuals and families in our State including the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program which we call Washington Basic Food or Basic Food, as well as Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA). Having ORIA located in CSD helps us coordinate with TANF and RCA policy managers on services to refugees and immigrants. I also want to point out that our State is trying to preserve a safety net for refugees and immigrants.

A few years ago when welfare reform passed, there was a five-year bar imposed on legal immigrants from receipt of federal means-tested benefits. In our State, we have actually created a couple of State programs to help preserve the safety net for them. The State family assistance program that I have listed on there is really a lookalike program to TANF, totally State-funded, and it serves legal immigrants who became ineligible for federal means-tested benefits under federal welfare reform. The food assistance program for legal immigrants is a lookalike program to the federal SNAP program but is funded by State funds so we can continue to provide food assistance to legal immigrants in our State that are illegible because of that five-year bar.

I just want to point out some of the services that ORIA provides directly. Most of our services really are focused on refugees in our State so the Refugee Health Screening program that you see up there, Refugee Resettlement Assistance (which is our INR program to help newly-arrived refugees navigate in their new communities), Services to Older Refugees program, the Refugee School Impact Grant, and an Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program are all funded with funds directly from the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

Our Naturalization Services Program is totally State-funded and it serves any legal immigrant who receives public assistance. Our Employment Assistance Program, which is our real focus because we think self-sufficiency is key to integration here and we spend a lot of time and efforts on employment assistance and that is funded through a variety of funding streams. I am going to talk a little bit more about that here in a minute. I do want to say that when I mentioned refugee I really am talking about anyone eligible for refugee benefits under federal law. So we are talking about refugees, asylees, Cuban/Haitian entrants, victims of human trafficking, and special immigrant visa holders.

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ORIA does not provide services directly to our clients. Rather, we provide services through contracts with organizations that have close ties to ethnic communities. Many of our contractors hire former refugees or were former refugees themselves when they entered the U.S. Our contracts are with Voluntary Refugee Resettlement Agencies, or the VOLAGs, local community colleges, many around here who employ bilingual staff, community-based organizations and other government agencies. All providers are required to provide services in an individual's primary language and in culturally appropriate ways. I have to say that our contractors have a long history of serving refugees. They work collaboratively together to ensure that services are provided in culturally appropriate ways. For example, our contractors will often share bilingual case managers when there is a need at another contractor's office to provide interpretive services for a refugee or an immigrant they are trying to serve. So there is a lot of collaboration that goes around among our providers.

We think that a first-hand knowledge of refugees and what they have been through before resettling in the U.S. is really instrumental to ensure the services are being provided as effectively as possible. I really think that the real strength of our program is our service providers. They are very dedicated to the success of the refugees and the immigrants they serve. They go well above and beyond providing services that are required in our contracts.

I want to talk specifically about Employment Services because that is a main focus of what we do. In our State, we have created what we call the LEP (Limited English Proficiency) Pathway, which is a specialized employment service program for refugees and immigrants. The Pathway began actually as a pilot in May of 1999 so it has been operating for about 14 years now and it went Statewide in October of that year. It provides employment services targeted specifically to non-English speaking people from a wide variety of countries and cultural backgrounds. The Pathway aims to provide a single, seamless program of employment services to increase participants' employability so they become self-sufficient and successfully integrate into their new communities.

Limited English proficient clients who receive TANF can meet their mandatory work participation through the LEP Pathway. And by the way, our TANF program here is called Work First. Pathway providers also assist non-TANF refugees who are in need of employment services. Generally if they are here less than five years we can serve them in our programs so that would include clients who have received Refugee Cash Assistance as well as those who have lost their Refugee Cash Assistance due to the eight-month time limit but are still in need of finding work.

The LEP Pathway caseload averages about 4,700 clients per year; that was the average over the last two years. And that is an unduplicated count. And about 75 percent of our Pathway participants are refugees so the majority of who we are serving are former refugees when they come in. The rest are immigrants, either receiving TANF or State family assistance, which is that State-funded TANF program I mentioned earlier.

Just to give you an idea of the Pathway funding, this is our funding for the current State fiscal year. We just started last July and will end in June. But we are funded from three funding streams essentially: our Temporary Assistance for Needy Family funds at \$3.6 million; our Refugee Social Services funds as well as TAG funds, targeted assistance grant funds, for \$1.9 million; and, then we get an allocation of State funds. This is allocated

to us through our State legislature. This year it is \$2.3 million. In the past it has been much higher than that. But you can see our total Pathway budget is about \$7.8 million.

It is nice to have a single seamless system for services that we support with all three funding streams but in doing so we have to be sure that we are able to ensure to our funders that we are using our funds appropriately. We have had to develop audit systems that will be able to ensure that we pay for TANF services - or we use TANF funds to pay for services to a TANF client or our funds for someone who is a refugee. Our State funds are our most flexible stream of money in that we can serve anyone in the Pathway with the State funds.

But even though it takes a bit of auditing on the backend to make sure that these funds are used appropriately I think it is well worth the effort to have a single seamless system that will serve refugees in our State. So collaboration, like I said earlier, collaboration in partnerships are critical to our success. We recognize that no single program or agency alone can effectively impact the challenging issues facing the refugees and immigrants we serve.

As our State's Refugee Coordinator I meet regularly with stakeholders in all six refugee resettlement areas of our State. Some of the meetings are monthly, some bimonthly, and some are quarterly. But each area meets regularly to discuss programs and services from the local level. In fact, I was just in a regional meeting yesterday in the Tri-Cities area, which is in the southwest corner of our State. And the big topic of the day was the Affordable Care Act. But we do have a lot of collaboration and we were trying to keep the lines of communication open to all of our stakeholders so that we know where our gaps in services are and what we might need to do to enhance the services that we are currently providing.

I want to say that each region at each local meeting will select two representatives that will sit on our Statewide Refugee Advisory Council. The council is established to provide recommendations and advise to DSHS on Statewide policies and services for refugees. So again, we are just trying to keep the lines of collaboration open.

I want to talk specifically about two projects that came from these collaborative efforts. One was the LEP Pathway Expansion project and the other one was the Basic Food Employment and Training [BFET] program, which is a program where we can leverage funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for employment services.

So one of our stakeholder groups in Keen County, actually in Seattle, raised concerns about the need for services in three areas. One was stabilizing newly arrived refugees by focusing on cultural orientation and providing ESL [English as a Second Language] to help them begin integrating before we send them out on job search. We called it intensive ESL because there is no job search enrolled and it was about five hours a day in providing ESL.

We know that the VOLAGs provide cultural orientation during the reception and placement period, the first 30 to 90 days the refugee arrives in the US, but there is so much new information coming at them and, you know, this is a whole different world to them. And so it has got to be like drinking out of a fire hose. There is just so

much information coming at them at once. And it just seems like in the community meetings that I go to that I get asked over and over about some basic cultural orientation questions. You know, how to get from Point A to Point B for example? Our stakeholders thought that it might be good to let them have that time to sort of integrate before we actually get on job search. They thought that if we could provide some classes that had cultural orientation context like how to take the bus kinds of things and how to shop and just to get them familiar with their new communities we thought that maybe we could get some faster language level gains when they get into our regular classes. Or maybe we could even see them getting better jobs at job entry. So that was the first area they talked about.

The second one was skills training. Providing skills training to clients specifically with low English proficiency levels to help them find work that is more than just minimum wage at job entry. Now we do provide skills training here in our State but because of clients' language levels it is very difficult for some of our refugee and immigrant population to get into some of those classes. So we thought that if we could focus on the lower level English speakers that perhaps we could get them into jobs more quickly and like I said, get them more jobs that pay more than just minimum wage. When we did a look at our caseload, we saw that about half of the clients that we serve - and you saw that the caseload was 4,700 per year - about half of them cannot access the skills training because of their language levels. Their proposal to us or their suggestion to us was why don't we focus on services on level - on those low level speakers and see how successful we can be.

The third area was subsidized employment. Our State Department of Commerce in partnership with DSHS manages a subsidized employment program for TANF clients. But very few LEP clients participate because of their lack of English proficiency.

The subsidized employment program that Commerce operates essentially takes a TANF grant and turns it into a paycheck. The employer provides them a check using the TANF money so it is just like a real job even though it is subsidized. But the idea is to help them develop the soft skills that they need to be able to be successful in the marketplace and to learn about the employer's requirements in the U.S. labor market. And it also gives them a good experience on their resume so that when they go out especially if they have not worked in the U.S. they can point at that and hopefully that is going to help them get a job. So in other words, we want this to help to develop the skills and experience they need to enter the workplace.

Essentially what the stakeholder group did is they came to us with those ideas and then ORIA started looking at the data to see if we could validate what their concerns were. And we actually found that, first of all, they were right. Very few LEP clients were getting into skills training or the subsidized employment program. But when we looked at the ones that did, we found, surprisingly, that the skills training and subsidized employment both those LEPs that went through actually had higher wages at job entry than some of the mainstream TANF clients that went through the programs. So that was interesting. And we thought that: if we were able to expand services specifically for LEP clients, would we see that continue? I mean it was such a small sample set that we were not sure but it is promising to see that.

We discussed this with the powers that be here in our State, DSHS Executive Management as well as the Governor's Office, and they were very supportive of moving forward with piloting these three initiatives. So they gave us funding for it.

We conducted an RFP (request for proposals) Statewide to select providers for this project. Here is the funding. The Intensive ESL had four classes with 68 individuals. ESL - we were able to get over \$106,000 for that part of the project. And I want to point out that providers ponied up an additional \$29,000 of their own funds to help support. They are very interested in seeing how well this project would work. For skills training, the funding totaled \$160,000. We had three classes. We wanted two provided by community-based organizations and one through a local community college to see if there is any differences in provided by those two organizations. And then the subsidized employment program, we just went to the Department of Commerce since they already had a program up and running. We were able to get \$500,000 for that program that was focused just on getting LEP clients into that project. We had five service providers that we funded for that - with that \$500,000 and all of them were Pathway providers because we knew they had the cultural capacity to serve refugees and immigrants.

I wanted to talk about the outcomes and just to let you know that on the skills training the outcomes were – it is just too soon to talk about outcomes. And I would really love to talk about them but, you know, for ESL it takes a while before you can get language level gains. So it is just too soon.

The pilot started in April 2012 and ended in June 2012. The subsidized employment ended in July 2012 and then the last skills training class that was provided by local community college ended just last month. So it is very early to tell and - so we do not have really any definitive data. I do know that from preliminary reports our providers reported on the skills training at least that 21 of the 60 clients who entered skills - or who went to the skills training class have already found work. We know that some of the subsidized employment clients are looking for work and some of them are getting jobs now.

But like I said, it is just too early to tell on the project but it is promising and we hope to be able to continue some of these pilot expansions in the future to test whether or not this is something that we want to fully fund as part of our program ongoing. So that was the Pathway Expansion project.

I do want to talk a little bit about the other project I mentioned, which is Basic Food Employment and Training. So the idea of leveraging funding through the Basic Food Employment and Training program actually came about at a meeting with our stakeholders. At the time our funding for Employment Services was being cut drastically because of the Great Recession and so we were all wringing our hands saying what can we do to continue to provide the services that we think our clients need.

One of our stakeholders said, well, what about this Employment and Training Program [BFET]. This is a program that is funded through the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Services (FNS). And it is a service that they will match 100 percent in federal dollars. The target population are clients that do not receive TANF

but receive federal SNAP benefits or basic food benefits. So by putting up our own money we were able to leverage funds from FNS into our programs. Our BFET program began in October 2012 and it provides employment services including job search workshops, computer basics, resume writing, job placement services as well as ESL to participants to gain language skills that they need to find and keep a job.

We were successful in leveraging the funding. We put up \$430,000 and we had to actually collaborate with our service providers to get this off the ground because they already had our State funds in their contracts. So we had to go to them and say would they be willing to reduce their contracts to help us fund this program. And we were able to come up with \$430,000 in State funds because we cannot match with federal funds but then State funds that FNS matched with another \$430,000 of their funds. Our program ended last June. They came to us and said, look, your program seems like it is going well so we have another \$161,825 available if you can use it and you do not need to match it. And guess what, we told them that would be a good thing and we put it into our program. They also said for this year, which begins next month in October, that they will give us an additional \$250,000 in unmatched funds should we be willing to participate in the employment training program next year and we will.

So for the first year I just want to point out how much funding we were able to leverage out of that program. We put up \$430,000. FNS put up \$430,000 and then added another \$161,000 of their own funds. So our total funds for that program came to just over \$1 million. That is out of a \$430,000 outlay. So for next year we are going to allocate another \$430,000 for BFET. FNS has agreed to put in the \$250,000 in unmatched funds. And then you add the other \$430,000 they are going to put up for our match. That means the program total is \$1.1 million.

Now that we have this program up and it is focused on refugees and immigrants who do not receive TANF so a lot of our RCA [Refugee Cash Assistance] clients or former Refugee Cash Assistance clients who are still in need of jobs are getting those federal food assistance benefits. So they would have been served in the Pathway, [but] we have moved them out of the Pathway [and] put them into this Basic Food Employment and Training program. And that lets us maximize the funding that we have in our Pathway program for the clients that were there. So it turned out to be, in my mind at least, a win-win situation.

The first year of our program, like I said, it started in October 2012, so here are some of the outcomes we have through June of 2013. We served a total of 476 clients, 462 were refugees, 14 were non-refugee immigrants. Out of those 476 that we served, 246 found work after participating in BFET. That is about 52 percent. Clients found work on average about 80 days after participating in the BFET program. The average wage at job entry was just over \$10 per hour. And 166 clients who went to work were still employed 90 days after job entry and that number may increase because some of them are still working but they have not hit the 90 day mark yet. So to me that was a real promising effort and we are going to continue to do that. It came out of the collaborations that we have. And like I say, our providers are LEP Pathway providers so they have the cultural capacity to be successful with our clients.

Those are a couple of examples of what our service delivery looks like and how we used collaboration to add services...where we [thought we] had gaps in the service delivery system. We are going to continue our collaboration efforts, that is, I think, one of the strengths of our program. We are looking at some housing issues and we are looking for partners to collaborate with in terms of what can we do to prevent homelessness among refugees and how significant is that problem here.

So we are going to continue moving forward with our collaboration because we know that, as I said earlier, one agency cannot do it alone. We just need to reach out and help each other help the clients that need our help. Like they say, it takes a village and I think that is about all I need. I am open to any questions that you might have.

Ellen Simon: Thank you so much, Mr. Medina. We will now review how to submit questions and ask our presenter the question you have been submitting throughout the webinar. To submit a question, just click on the word Q&A, type your question in the top box, and click on the word Ask to submit your question. And now we will start taking questions.

Louisa Jones: The very first question, Mr. Medina, is how long can a family receive the State family assistance?

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

Louisa Jones: Great, thank you. And what were the different types of skills training provided?

Tom Medina: So we had two classes - well, actually three. Two - the two were community-based organizations. One was building maintenance and the other one was electronic assembly. The community college, the class that just ended last month, is providing a nursing assistance class to help folks get into the health field.

Ellen Simon: Great, thank you. And what industries and job titles were utilized for the subsidized employment?

Tom Medina: I am sorry, say that again?

Ellen Simon: What industries and job titles were utilized for the subsidized employment program?

Tom Medina: I do not have that information. I can get back to you with that. That is a program managed by Commerce. And like I say, we do not have the outcome reports from them yet. So I can tell you what specific job placements were but I would need to get that information from Commerce.

Ellen Simon: Great, thank you, that would be great if you could just send us that information. And our next question is: what is the time period of the eligibility for refugees in the program? For example, is it three years post-arrival, five years, another time?

Tom Medina: So for the LEP Pathway program it is five years. So we will serve them - you know, refugees as long as they have been in the U.S. for under five years. That is really because a lot of the funding comes from the Office of Refugee Resettlement and they have a five year limit on the employment services.

Ellen Simon: Great, thank you. And have you collected client satisfaction surveys? And if yes, what have the results been like?

Tom Medina: No, we have not. We have talked about that and that is something that is on our radar screen. I would really love to do [that]. We are calling it Community Conversations where we want to talk to the refugees that we are serving and talk about their experiences with our services and how well we did. Our preliminary conversations about that is we want to be careful because we want to engage the refugees in a way where they are willing to give us what they really feel and not tell us what they think they want us to say. I think not only do you have to be careful from a cultural perspective and ask the questions the right way, but I think the setting has to be right so they will feel safe enough to tell us what they think rather than - like I said earlier, what they think we want them to say. So that may not be easy to do, we have talked about it. We just have not implemented it yet but it is on our radar screen.

Ellen Simon: Great, and another question, can you elaborate on the mental health services provided?

Tom Medina: Those mental health services really are - there is some counseling. Now we have only three small contracts unfortunately for mental health. They are all in Keen County. It was a program that we started with some State funding and wanted to expand it Statewide but just have not had the wherewithal to do it. So it is counseling as well as what the U.S. mental health system looks like. So that they can help access services better. Now we do have a system of mental health providers out there for clients who received Medicaid or even RMA [Refugee Medical Assistance]. But you know, we always worry about the cultural capacity of our mental health providers. It is getting to be more and more of an issue. And so we are talking to our mental health providers in our areas of resettlement to help ensure they have the cultural capacity to serve refugees and we are drawing connections between our refugee providers, for example, in Spokane which is on the east side of the State, we helped organize the conversations between the mental health agency there called Spokane Mental Health with the World Relief which is our VOLAG there. So that they could understand each other better - or systems better. It turned out that Spokane Mental Health did have bilingual case managers but they did not have a lot of knowledge about refugees and the refugee situation. And by having World Relief go over there and talk about resettlement and having Spokane Mental Health go to World Relief and talk about their services we have been able to get more refugees involved in that program there.

Ellen Simon: Thank you so much. The questions keep on coming in, this is great, please continue submitting your questions. So we have many more questions for you, Mr. Medina. What component of the BFET training do you think led to the fairly high initial wage of \$10 an hour? Is that a high wage for Washington State? And what is the average starting wage for refugees?

Tom Medina: The average is about \$9.75. We have a very high minimum wage here. It was the highest in the country at one time and I am going to say \$9.19 but I could be off a few pennies on that one. But it is over \$9.00 an hour so that helps drive that up. But you know, again, our providers have a lot of close ties with businesses in the community that serve LEP. They managed to get at least for BFET higher minimum wage than we do through the Pathway. The Pathway, our average job wage at entry, like I said earlier, was \$9.75. So you know, part of what drives that up, like I say, is a high minimum wage but that is actually a very good question. I would like to know what drove the extra twenty-five cents. If there is something that our BFET providers are doing that we should be doing at Pathway we need to know what that is.

Louisa Jones: Great. Our next question is: when refugees on TANF participate in the intensive ESL program, how do they meet the TANF work participation requirement?

Tom Medina: So you know, there are two ways - since it is a standalone activity you can count that as skills - life skills training under the job search requirements - or the job search activity that is allowed by the feds, part of that can be life skills training. But that is time-limited. You know, it is either six or 12 weeks out of the year depending on whether your State is a high-need State or not. So 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. We could - you know, if there is enough labor market topics in the ESL context that you are training you can actually look at it as jobs skill training for employment...which is a non-core activity and stack it with other core activities and get the participation that way. But we are not - 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.

Ellen Simon: That is great. And do the VOLAGs provide employment training too?

Tom Medina: Yes, they do. They are a big part of our service delivery network. And you know, that is important because, you know, right when a lot of refugees come in they sort of develop a tie to the organization that resettled them and it helps ensure coordination of those services. So yes, they are a big employment provider.

Louisa Jones: How long does the skills training classes last for?

Tom Medina: Well, the skills training programs went from April through June so it was three months. And those are for the CBOs [community-based organizations] and then the skills training from the community college started in July and went through August so that was an eight-week training course.

Louisa Jones: Thank you, and how did you determine the three areas of skills training?

Tom Medina: So, well, when we issued the RFP [request for proposal] we required the proposers to do some homework if you will out in the community and see and justify to us why they are proposing what they are proposing. In other words, we wanted to make sure that once they put somebody through skills training that

there is going to be a need and some employees out there that were looking for those kinds of skill sets in people that they hire. So that was part of the referral - the competitive procurement process. We had evaluators come in and look at all the proposals and those are the ones they chose.

Louisa Jones: Great, I have a three-pronged question. So I will feed you one question at a time.

Tom Medina: Thank you.

Louisa Jones: So you do not have to remember them. Does your office determine eligibility and make payments for TANF basic cash assistance?

Tom Medina: Our office does not but our division does. You know, ORIA is part of the Community Services Division and, you know, we have 62 Community Services offices throughout the State where people come in and apply for public assistance benefits and their policy folks are here in our division. They are right across the hall from me. In fact, I used to work over there at one point in time. So they do the eligibility. The good thing about the coordination is that, for example, if there are policy changes coming down through ORR like when the special immigrant visa holders were made eligible for refugee benefits that information came to our office as a State Coordinator. It came to me and I just walked across the hall and we started putting it all together. They are here in our division, not in our office.

Ellen Simon: Okay, great. The next part is in terms of measuring employment placement as an outcome. Do you have an outcome measure for ESL and job readiness programs beyond work participation rates?

Tom Medina: We have measurements for ESL. We use the CASAS test, the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System. And they go from a scale of one to - I think it is eight. I do not know the higher levels. The lower the level is the lower your English proficiency and obviously the higher level the more proficient you are. Our rules are that if you are tested between ESL levels 1 through 6 then you are eligible for LEP Pathway services. We considered your proficiency limited enough that we will put you in the Pathway. So that is how we do those measures. And each level gain to go from a Level 1 to a Level 2 a client has to pass certain sublevels like in reading, listening, and writing skills. And once they pass all those levels they move up to a full level gain. So there is different measures even within each level. In terms of job readiness, no, we have not established any kind of measure of job readiness and I wish we could.

Louisa Jones: Thank you, Mr. Medina. And now another question, for those people who did not find jobs, do you know what the reasons were or maybe a common theme as to why they could not find jobs? Was it related to training or any barriers?

Tom Medina: Boy, that is a real hard question to answer because there are so many folks that are trying to get work there. Obviously the cultural differences are a big thing and we have a lot of folks that come in that do not have an educational level that is on par with the U.S. system. So just lack of education can do it or can be a real

significant barrier. And the lack of skill sets, you know, a lot of them have not had skill sets that lend themselves to employment here in the U.S. That is why we looked at skills training. But I think just a lack of familiarity with our labor market and the lack of education as well as the lack of English proficiency are very significant barriers and I think that that is going to be - that is a real hard one to overcome. In terms of long term, I mean most refugees are really, you know, rearing to go. Our case managers love having refugees on their case. I am speaking of the TANF ones because they do not seem to have issues with them willing and able to participate. It is just that getting jobs for them is harder.

So that is a very general way to answer a specific question but there are so many barriers, so many barriers. And you know, mental health is an issue and somebody asked about that earlier that I think we need to look into a little bit more deeply to say is there someone that has emotional issues that is making that barrier even more significant and if so how can we identify them and how can we develop some intervention strategies for them. I think the reasons they are not getting employment just runs the gamut from, you know, A to Z and if we could zero in on some of them that would be great. But I mean it is just a real challenge.

Louisa Jones: That is a great answer, and very similarly there is a separate question that is somewhat related. Have you found that certain ethnic groups and refugees from certain countries have been able to be more successful than others? And I guess in terms of maybe more successful earlier on or are there certain types of different supports that you have found that are a little bit easier to use for certain populations than others?

Tom Medina: Well, that is - gosh, that - again, that is a hard question to answer. Now we know that a lot - and I will go the other way, a lot of Somalis are hard to serve because of that lack of educational - and I am painting a general picture here - but because of the lack of educational attainment. I think that that can be as well as the fact that a lot of them come from the camps so it is really hard for them to make a quick adjustment. We know that when a lot of the Iraqis came over, even though they had skill sets and educational levels that were much higher, they were on par with ours, they had - they were harder to serve for other issues. A lot of them, I think, expected more when they came here in terms of the assistance they were going to get. I mean the reasons they were refugees was because they fought on our side in the war over there. And we brought them over here and they got on TANF and, you know, for folks that had some good skill sets to do work in their home country they came here and, you know, the TANF rules are you have got to get a first job and build on that. And so I think it is hard for them to accept the fact that they may have been, you know, an engineer or a banker in their home country and they get here and the jobs that we are able to find them are entry-level jobs. There is some resistance there. A lot of refugees from the former Soviet Union have been very successful because of their education and skill set that actually did lend themselves to work here in the U.S. I think those would be easier to serve. Again, I am talking in generalities. I hope that answered the question.

Ellen Simon: Thank you, Mr. Medina. Do you have a goal of minimum hours per week that you count as a successful job placement, perhaps 30 or 40 hours a week? And how is economic self-sufficiency measured? Is there a requirement for income level for it to count as a successful job placement?

Tom Medina: No, and that is a really good question about the self-sufficiency piece. One of the things that our Refugee Advisory Council is doing now is trying to define what that means so they can help us steer this ship a little bit better. But you know, how do you measure self-sufficiency? In Keen county it was University of Washington that put this self-sufficiency calculator out to say what does somebody minimally need to earn in order to be considered from their view self-sufficient? The wage levels were \$15 to \$20 an hour and that is really out of reach at entry for a lot of our TANF refugees. How do you measure self-sufficiency? 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. So I guess that is a way of saying I do not know what self-sufficiency looks like. It looks differently to different people depending on where you are coming from. We have not set a benchmark for that.

Louisa Jones: Thank you. And how long is the intensive ESL class per day and then also how long is the entire course?

Tom Medina: We set it up for four days a week at five hours a day so it is 20 hours. It was a one quarter course. We actually would like to take another run at the intensive ESL and re-implement a project based on lessons learned from the first one and see if we can enhance the intensive ESL approach. The first set was just one quarter, like I say, four days a week. The reason we wanted four days a week is because newly arrived refugees in particular have a lot of appointments to make out in the community with school or doctor or whatever. So it is hard for them to go five days a week. We wanted them to have a day so they could make those kinds of appointments.

One of the early lessons learned, it looks like in some of the preliminary reports we got, is that some refugee clients thought that they needed more than just a day. The idea was do we go with fewer days, say maybe three days, but longer classes during the day? The balancing part of that was that some of the refugees felt that five hours was too long to sit in a class. I think we need to put all that together and figure out how we want to make the next iteration of this intensive ESL program look based on those concerns and see if we can help them be more successful with a different approach.

Louisa Jones: Tom, final just re-clarification of one question and then we are going to wrap up. You had mentioned earlier about the maximum number of years or months that they can receive cash assistance. Can you repeat your answer to that?

Tom Medina: For TANF, it is five years. There is a five-year limit for TANF. There are some exceptions for hardship cases but generally it is a five-year rule. That is, all five years in your lifetime.

Louisa Jones: One actual final last question just came in so I will ask it and then we will go to the poll questions. Do clients receive cash assistance or additional benefits when they are enrolled and are participating in the LEP Pathway Expansion project?

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Tom Medina: Yes, we started out with TANF clients. They were all TANF. But as we got into it we actually expanded it to include some Refugee Cash Assistance clients. They are all getting benefits of some sort when they are enrolled in the class.

Ellen Simon: Thank you so much, Mr. Medina. And now if everyone could please respond to two poll questions. The first one is: overall, how satisfied are you with today's webinar? The options are very satisfied, satisfied, neutral, unsatisfied, and very unsatisfied. We will wait a few more seconds for a few more folks to respond.

Our next and last poll question: this webinar increased my knowledge of how Washington provides services to refugees through specialized service units designed to improve placements and services for refugees in the State. The options are strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Thank you everyone for responding. Now I would like to turn it back over to Makda Belay.

Makda Belay: Thank you for attending this webinar and thank you, Mr. Medina, for sharing your thoughts and answering questions on how Washington State is providing services to refugees. We hope that this was beneficial to you and the community that you serve and encourage you to begin thinking about ideas for next steps in your communities as a result of knowledge gained from this webinar. The PowerPoint, transcript, and audio recording will be available for everyone within the coming weeks. On behalf of ORR, thank you for participating in today's webinar.

Coordinator: Thank you for your participation in today's conference call. The call has concluded. You may disconnect at this time.

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