

Humanitarian Aid to Asylum Seekers -- A Multi-Sectoral Partnership

Overview: Riverside County's Asylum Seeker Response supports overflows to neighboring border cities and provides humanitarian aid to families seeking sanctuary in the United States to prevent hundreds of street releases and homelessness.

Challenge: Families from South America, Central America, Europe, and Asia are fleeing poverty and violence in their countries and seeking asylum in the United States have overwhelmed federal immigration agencies. According to a Report to Congress on Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2021, the United States received 130,132 asylum seekers during FY 2020 and expects to receive more than 300,000 during FY 2021¹. Leading federal immigration agencies such as the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) release families from inundated detention centers to transportation centers when communities largely led by community-based organizations (CBOs) are unavailable or at capacity. Public health officials also grew concerned over the impact and spread of COVID-19 in the U.S. due its widespread nature in countries families were fleeing from. Due to the large influx and limited resources among federal immigration agencies, families are not COVID-19 tested nor vaccinated before their release to CBOs and public transportation centers.

Solution: Riverside County launched its first asylum seeker sheltering program in March 2019 and assisted over 2,600 families and children. The County initiated its proactive planning efforts at the start of 2021 as potential influxes were reported. The action plan included coordination with CBP, state departments such as CalOES and CDSS, Federal EFSP National Board, and CBOs and focused on identifying and staging resources to receive families and avoid street releases. These efforts paid off on March 3, 2021, when the CBP and ICE started releasing asylum-seeking families in Riverside County. The County's Emergency Management Department (EMD) stepped in as the lead coordinating body utilizing its Incident Command System (ICS) as it worked with state, county, and CBOs to prepare, respond, and break out the operation into three logistical strategies and resources: 1) Testing – led by County Public Health, 2) Transportation – County EMD, and 3) Lodging – County Housing & Workforce Solutions. The county's plan coordinated testing and vaccinations, isolation/quarantine accommodations,

sheltering, and other essential services. Families in isolation/ quarantine housing were offered supportive services overseen by County Public Health. All other families were also sheltered while County and CBOs provided travel coordination.

Innovation: The County's Emergency Management Department (EMD) utilized its ICS model to prepare for a rapid response and facilitated coordination calls with local stakeholders. The response relied heavily on its incident-based data tracker for effective operations management. The data management tool proved valuable and measures bed turn over, guided decisions on food and lodging services, and collects demographics, length of stay, and COVID-19 exposure results (see attached). Ultimately, the County's Housing & Workforce Solutions Department leveraged its relationship with the community to launch a Rapid Response Network of immigration advocacy groups who work together to provide social services, which include, food, medical and behavioral health care, case management, and volunteers.

Results: From March 3, 2021 to September 9, 2021, the County of Riverside has welcomed 7,260 asylum seekers. 2,026 individuals tested positive or were considered exposed to COVID-19 and were sheltered 10-days to quarantine. These families were able to travel the day after quarantine was lifted by a County Public Health nurse. 5,234 individuals tested negative or were non-exposed to COVID-19 and were also safely sheltered for one to two days while travel arrangements were made.

Replicability: The coordinated services of the Asylum Seeker Response model can be replicated in response to other crises, especially in states and counties experiencing a similar influx of asylum-seeking families. County social service agencies by nature are best positioned to lead and facilitate needs-based humanitarian assistance. By using an emergency response model these agencies can significantly improve service delivery in times of crisis.

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ⁱ <https://www.state.gov/reports/report-to-congress-on-proposed-refugee-admissions-for-fy-2021/>