

TO: Freeport Town Council

FROM: Melanie Sachs, Chair, Freeport Working Group to Welcome New Mainers

DATE: October 15, 2019

RE: Freeport Working Group to Welcome New Mainers Final Report

It has been my pleasure to serve as chair of the Freeport Working Group to Welcome New Mainers. I offer this summary of our work and results as a final report to the Freeport Town Council.

## I. Organization

The Freeport Working Group (hereafter known as FWG) was formed as a short-term, ad-hoc committee at the request of the Freeport Town Council, to assess community resources and provide information for Freeport residents who wanted to assist the asylees who had arrived at the Portland Expo in late June. An organizational meeting of interested residents was held on July 23, 2019 by Council Chair Tracy. Discussion was held regarding mission, composition of group, and outreach needed to Freeport community to let residents and critical organizations know about the FWG and to fill additional committee spots. People confirmed their interest in continuing with the group, and a chair was selected. The community was then notified of the need for volunteers, and spots were filled on first-come, first-served basis.

The first full meeting of the FWG was July 30, 2019. Meetings were open to the public, and minutes and supplemental documents were posted on the town of Freeport's website.

The FWG held four full committee meetings and three additional event subcommittee meetings. In between meetings, work was done by committee members, with review of materials done electronically.

Committee members include: Melanie Sachs, Chair; Freeport Town Councilors Doug Reighley and Tawni Whitney (Tawni also representing Freeport Friends); Johanna Hanselman (General Assistance Administrator, Town of Freeport); Liza Moore (representing Freeport Community Services); Sarah Leighton (representing YMCA); Maura Pillsbury (also an RSU5 Board of Directors member, and chair of the Event Subcommittee); Sallie Smith, Nancy Kieran, Beatrice Peron Dahlen; Dean Paterson; and Steve Kelly (event subcommittee). Sarah Tracy, Chair of the Freeport Town Council, served as an ex-officio member and provided key support. Peter Joseph, Town Manager, also provided support at several key intervals. Several residents who became host families also joined the meetings at times, and several representatives from community organizations were sent the minutes and contributed by email so they could stay informed, but were not able to attend meetings.

## II. Mission and Focus Areas

For the purposes of this working group, we utilized the following definition of an asylee:

*A person who sought and obtained protection from persecution from inside the United States or at the border. An asylee is an individual who meets the international definition of refugee – a person with well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group, who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. In the U.S., asylum seekers apply for protection from inside the country or at a port of entry. In contrast, a refugee is a person who applies for protection from outside of the U.S. (National Immigration Forum, 1/10/19).*

The FWG also collaboratively compiled an organizing statement after the first meeting which would guide our work:

*The Working Group will organize and distribute resources and information for Freeport residents to assist asylum seekers who have chosen to live in our community. These resources may include utilizing the in-kind supports from the Town of Freeport, including staff time, communication tools, and facilities, but not through allocating money from the approved budget. It was discussed that while we do have some excellent supports for all residents, both current and brand-new to Freeport, this group of new residents face language, cultural, and eligibility barriers that will require an extra bit of support established at the outset.*

Four areas of focus evolved through the committee discussions: a need for a comprehensive resource guide, coordination of direct needs and services for any new families arriving from the Expo and their host families, exploration of a fundraising effort, and a community educational/awareness event. Each goal is described in detail in the next section.

### III. Committee Goals

#### A. Goal 1: Resource Guide

FWG members prioritized the need for a comprehensive list of resources and ongoing ways to help the asylum seekers currently residing in our community, whether they be here in Freeport or anywhere in southern Maine. As a note, this guide is an excellent resource for any person living in Freeport who may need support, as they may also be eligible for many of the services.

Committee members researched critical areas of support, located both in Freeport and in the Greater Portland area. These areas include housing, food, legal and case management resources, health care, and education. The first guide was compiled and posted on the town's website just a few weeks after the first meeting (8/5/19), and has been updated several times. The most recent version can be found at <https://www.freeportmaine.com/general-assistance/pages/asylum-seeker-working-group>, along with meeting notes and the Guide to Welcoming Immigrants from Welcoming the Stranger, a local mentoring organization here in Maine ([www.wtsmaine.com](http://www.wtsmaine.com)).

#### B. Goal 2: Coordination of Direct Needs

During each meeting, the FWG discussed ways to coordinate assistance to families who were in Freeport, or who were anticipated to arrive. The Chair of the committee initially reached out to every nonprofit in Freeport, including churches, to determine what services were being provided already to asylum seekers and to assess whether they had capacity to be the coordinating entity. When no one entity was able to assume that role, a collaborative approach evolved. Host families were invited to the meetings, and were incredibly generous to not only open their homes, but often act as case managers to connect the asylee families with services. To our knowledge, there were three host families here in Freeport.

Freeport Friends evolved as the key leader of the community response, coordinating concrete needs for the families through community donations of household goods, facilitating transportation, and publicizing volunteer opportunities. RSU5 Community Programs immediately expanded their ESOL classes, and the

FWG helped to facilitate volunteers for this program. Johanna Hanselman arranged for General Assistance appointments as soon as possible, and coordinated with the families' previous Southern Maine communities to facilitate a smooth transition. Johanna also worked closely with Yarmouth providers for best practices information. Freeport Housing Trust staff were helpful with housing applications and process information. Freeport Community Services provided food pantry services and some household items. RSU5 enrolled students for pre-K and school, and the nutrition director arranged for free lunch applications. Casco Bay YMCA encouraged families to apply for free scholarships, so that childcare and social opportunities could be easily accessed. Wolfe's Neck Farm connected with committee about a variety of possible options, such as exploring temporary housing (which we did not end up needing) and offering programs. The FWG Chair checked in with the hosts and organizations, and provided individual referrals and information to fill gaps.

Ultimately one family had to relocate to Portland, due to the lack of affordable housing for large families here in Freeport. One family chose to settle in Freeport with housing through Freeport Housing Trust, and another joined the Yarmouth community, in housing sponsored by the Yarmouth Compassionate Housing Initiative. Affordable housing – both short-term and long-term – was noted as the most difficult challenge for these families (which as widely reported, is a challenge for many people in Southern Maine.) At this time, families are well connected with resources, or have connections to access additional help as needed.

### C. Goal 3: Exploration of Fundraising Effort

One charge by the Town Council was to explore whether funds should be raised specifically to assist asylum seekers in our community. Asylum seekers have strict restrictions on employment and income, and failure to adhere to these guidelines could impact their application for asylum. Funds cannot be given directly to families for this reason, so donations would have to be designated to an agency or organization.

An outside group or nonprofit already set up to receive donations and make purchases on behalf of the families was the preferred first option. As noted above, there was no one entity that stated they had the capacity (i.e. legal status to accept donations, staffing, etc.) to be the lead organization in these efforts.

The FWG then spent a considerable amount of time exploring whether an additional support fund could be set up through the Town of Freeport, as the Town of Brunswick has done. (The Town of Freeport has several designated support funds, such as fuel, prescriptions, and rental assistance, which are administered by Johanna Hanselman.) The FWG Chair connected with several Brunswick administrators to possibly replicate their model of establishing a support fund administered by the town. It was concluded that a similar fund in Freeport was not truly viable, as Brunswick has a dedicated staff determining needs, a voucher system in place, and strong separation of duties (those making determination of need, financial management, and approval are separated through several different people.) Brunswick also established their fund based on the scope of need – they have over 70 people they are serving, while at this time, Freeport has three.

The FWG concluded that while we would not recommend establishing a brand-new fund, direct donations are encouraged to those organizations, both locally as well as in Greater Portland, that support asylum seekers. Contact information for many of these organizations can be found in the Resource Guide described above, and several will be represented at the community event (see next section.)

#### D. Goal 4: Community Event

The final area of focus for the FWG was to organize and offer an educational event for our community. The FWG noted there may be misconceptions about asylum seekers that persist in the community, and wanted to sponsor an event that could raise awareness of challenges faced by New Mainers. A free panel presentation event entitled “Welcoming New Mainers to Our Community” will be held at the Freeport Community Library on November 7, 2019, from 6:30-8:00 pm. Representatives from Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project, Hope Acts, and Yarmouth Compassionate Housing Initiative will lead a community conversation about asylum seekers, the challenges they face, community resources, and how residents can get involved. A resource list will be provided for the attendees. Local organizations such as Freeport Friends, Freeport Community Services, and RSU 5 Community Programs, as well as the three presenting organizations, will have information available, and attendees can learn more on how to volunteer for or donate to those organizations.

#### IV. Conclusion

The Freeport Working Group to Welcome New Mainers accomplished several key goals in just a few months. It developed a comprehensive guide that can serve as a continuing resource for both asylum seekers and others in need; connected resources, identified needs, and provided support to host families and asylum seekers; brought helping organizations and entities together to collaborate effectively; explored the feasibility of starting a new fund; and will wrap up its activities by hosting an education and awareness event.

The Freeport community is fortunate to have many organizations and individuals ready to respond to those in need. Coordination of those responses to avoid duplication and enhance communication is essential to effective community response to any emergency. With the end of this committee’s work, it is hoped that those entities find value in continued collaboration, whether it be for asylum seekers or other folks looking to call Freeport home who may need a little extra help.

Thank you to the Town Council for making this issue a priority. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to serve with this outstanding group of volunteers, who gave many hours of dedicated service to ensure a welcoming response for those who choose to come to our community.