

Update on Asylum Seekers in Portland and Potential Ways To Assist

7/3/19

GPCOG Community Meeting

On Tuesday, July 2, GPCOG hosted a meeting of community faith leaders, immigrant community leaders, municipal officials and social service agency representatives to share information in order to begin the process of coming up with solutions to provide temporary housing for asylum seekers that will ultimately lead to permanent housing.

Maine has already been experiencing a lack of available, affordable housing for some time, so the emphasis was on coming up with solutions for Affordable Housing For All as discussions continue.

There are an amazing number of organizations and people who are already providing a wide range of services for new Mainers – many churches, immigrant associations, compassionate housing initiatives (Yarmouth, Brunswick) who provide resources such as (but not limited to) host families; cellphones; financial assistance; education programs on how to navigate public education, cultural changes, finances, tenancy; language classes & more.

My understanding is that currently the municipalities which have been financially supporting the asylum seekers or have promised to financially contribute are the Cities of Portland and South Portland. Other municipalities have expressed their interest in being involved and supportive but I am not aware of any other monetary contributions.

The City of Portland is still taking donations and have received around \$500,000 as of 7/1/19.

Current Needs:

- At Expo - Hygiene supplies; staff who can manage leading/coordinating volunteers; volunteers to serve meals, etc.
- Host families – GPCOG is coordinating with immigrant leaders, faith leaders, the City of Portland, and agencies that can provide screening services to assemble a program that will match volunteer host families in the region with asylum seeking families. An intake email has been set up for interested hosts: HostHomes@gpcog.org.
- Financial Donations (Portland still accepting donations – some of which are being used to off-set city costs of running the Expo shelter)
- Asking the State to allow recent asylum seekers to be eligible for General Assistance.

Long term needs:

The region faces a significant challenge in identifying long-term housing for the asylum seeking families – as well as for everyone seeking affordable housing in the area. This will continue to be a focus of GPCOG and area municipalities.

Since the Expo needs to be vacated by mid-August, GPCOG staff and municipal leaders are pursuing two strategies. The first is to settle as many asylum seeking families that are in Portland's family shelter and qualify for General Assistance into permanent housing. For the asylum seekers in the Expo, find Host Homes that will provide a bridge to the late fall when seasonal housing becomes available.

Transportation is also a significant need, and GPCOG is focusing its efforts to find permanent housing and temporary host homes in municipalities that are served by public transportation. In addition, volunteer drivers are needed to help.

Other Needs Include: Furniture donations; Assisting host families (meals, playdates, etc.); supporting host families (meal preparation, playdates, transportation); Clothing donations.

What Freeport Official may want to consider doing NOW:

- Contact the State to encourage changing General Assistance rules to allow these new Mainers to be eligible for General Assistance.
- Offer staff support to help at the Expo.
- Distribute information to residents interested in assisting with current needs at the Expo (where to drop off hygiene supplies which are in urgent need; where to send financial donations, hosting individuals or families).
- Promote the Host Homes program to Freeport residents.
- Establish a pool of people interested in assisting once new Mainers are settled (supporting host families, providing transportation, donating furniture, clothes)

Specific to Freeport - if the town wanted to sponsor a fundraising event of some kind, we could organize a 5K fun run/walk or see if a community music group would be willing to play and we could organize a benefit concert in Bow Street Park.

Below is a copy of an email message I sent to you earlier:

Peter –

I listened to the Town Council's discussion at the 6/18 TC meeting about the asylum seekers coming to Portland. It sounds like there was a majority on the Council supporting some kind of effort to make a contribution which could consist of funds raised by community members or some from unexpended funds from the fy2019 budget.

I think it would be very important that the town do something a bit out of the ordinary if we are going to try to do some fundraising and also use town funds. By this I mean, not just sending out an appeal letter or putting notices in the paper/web/etc. **I would be willing to organize a kick off event....**

1. Maybe a 1 mile/5Kfun run/walk at the High School Track. The registration fee is the donation (plus of course we would accept more donations). We could try to get donations from local businesses to have an after party with light food and refreshments and maybe some raffle prizes. Maybe we could order those hats we gave employees last year (different color) and give them to those who contribute more than \$x (to be determined) and have some for sale. We could use them for the volunteer recognition gift in the fall too so we don't have to worry about extras.
2. Or, see if we can get a group to donate their time to hold a benefit concert down at the Memorial Park. We could ask for donations for those attending and again, see if we can get businesses to donate refreshments and maybe some raffle prizes we could raffle off.....and a 50-50 is always popular.

I've contacted a few businesses and organizations to see if they would like to partner with the Town in any fundraising event. Here are the responses:

LL Bean – was already in discussions with the City of Portland about a donation of some essential products. But, they said to let them know if anything specific comes to mind.

Bath Savings – they provide support by making significant donations to the United way. If we need volunteer time for a specific event, they can talk with Michelle Barker to see what they can drum up.

Maine Beer – Dan Kleban is out on vacation, but are wondering what specifically we had in mind.

FCS – Already providing donation of goods.

Freeport Housing Trust - they have an apartment available at Maplewood. It is a 1 bedroom, so it could accommodate 2 people. They would need to have a way to cover the year of rent, either a guarantor or something like that. Matt Peters said he knows lots of people have come out to support these individuals, so perhaps there is an opportunity to find a match there. As a last resort, they said we could probably use the supplemental GA monies that FHT has provided to the Town.

If we wanted to try to get donations for food/refreshments/raffle prizes, I would go to the businesses that in the past were very generous about making raffle prize donations for our Volunteer Recognition BBQ.

Johanna

