



May 19, 2017

Director Nick Macchione, MS, MPH, FACHE
County of San Diego
Health and Human Services Agency (HHS)A
1600 Pacific Highway, Room 206
San Diego, CA 92101

Re the Status of Mental and Behavioral Health in Refugee and Ethnic Communities

Dear Director Macchione:

On behalf of refugee and ethnic service providers, faith-based initiatives, and like-minded stakeholders, we are writing to inform you of our views of the status of mental and behavioral health of refugee and ethnic communities in San Diego County.

Collectively, we seek to elevate the voices of underserved communities to advocate for trauma-informed care, as well as culturally and linguistically appropriate services, specifically as it relates to homelessness / housing concerns, substance use and abuse, crisis services, suicide prevention, refugees / asylum seekers in custody, and workforce development. Additionally, we seek to advance policies that foster the joint County of San Diego / Live Well San Diego vision for a region that is *Building Better Health, Living Safely, and Thriving*.^[1]

Background

The County of San Diego is the largest refugee-impacted county in the State of California.^[2] For nearly a decade, the county has been the primary refugee resettlement site in the state.^[3]

During federal fiscal years 2012 and 2016, data culled from San Diego County resettlement agencies confirmed that 12,850 individuals identified as primary refugees, secondary refugees, asylees, survivors of trafficking, Cuban / Haitian entrants, and special immigration visa (SIV) holders were resettled in the region.^[4]

Moreover, as of 2013, approximately 150,000 refugees / former refugees resided in San Diego County.^[5] At least 30,000 are estimated to reside in one neighborhood in Central Region—City Heights.^[6] Several pieces of literature identify the need for culturally sensitive mental and behavioral health resources as a priority for these communities.

The month of May is recognized nationally as Mental Health Month, in order to raise awareness and understanding of mental health conditions, reduce stigma, educate the public, and advocate for affected individuals and communities. It is widely known that refugees and similarly vulnerable populations contend with mental and behavioral conditions. According to the State of California Office of Refugee Health (ORH), mental health condition is one of top five diseases.

Nearly two decades ago, the Surgeon General of the United States issued the statement, “there is no health without mental health.” [8] The intimate relationship between mental health and physical health is imperative for refugee and ethnic populations, given the traumatic nature of their journey to the United States. Most refugees suffer trauma and stress in three phases known as pre-flight, flight, and post-flight. This compounded triple-trauma paradigm results in condition(s) which are seldom diagnosed until after resettlement in a host community. Furthermore, limited availability of culturally sensitive resources for these populations further reinforces taboos surrounding mental and behavioral health conditions.

Enclosed with this letter is *Advancing Equity: Refugee and Ethnic Mental Health*, a May 2017 report covering the topic of mental health in San Diego County. The publication details emergent themes and recommendations from community dialogues conducted with more than 37 individuals representing 15 different ethnic community-based organizations, community-and-faith based initiatives, academic institutions situated in San Diego County, as well as public-sector participants, including the County of San Diego Behavioral Health Services (BHS). We urge you to review the findings of this report and join us as we collectively address the pressing concerns raised by community members.

We greatly appreciate your consideration and look forward to opportunities to work together to improve the status of mental and behavioral health in refugee and ethnic communities. Please direct any questions or comments to me via email or phone: elou@nilesisters.org | (619) 265–2959 x 200.

Respectfully submitted by the following individuals and groups:

Business Entities

Kouros Phillips Development
Koyto Services Agency

Community and / or Non-profit Organizations

African and Caribbean Refugees Association
African Coalition Workforce
Black Political Association of California (BAPAC)
 San Diego Chapter of BAPAC
The Bridge Organization
Sheila Mitra-Sarkar, Ph.D., Principal
 FutureTrans and Co-Chair, Inclusive Cities
Haitian Bridge Alliance
Horn of Africa
Madina Maho, Somali Bantu of San Diego
Elizabeth Lou, President / CEO,
 Nile Sisters Development Initiative
South Sudanese Christian Youth Community
 Organization (SSCYCO)
Southern Sudanese Community Center (SSCC)
United Women of East Africa Support Team (UWEAST)

Faith-Based Entities

Sudanese American Presbyterian Church

Healthcare Professionals

Bonnie Copland RN, MSN, PHN
John Chuol Kuek, PhD, MFTI
Dr. Patience Onyegbule, DNP, APRN, FNP-C, CNM, CCD

Mental and Behavioral Health Providers

Mental Health America of San Diego County

Resettlement Agencies and / or International Entities

United Nations Association USA (UNA-USA) San Diego
United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
(USCRI)

Community Leaders and / or Members

Agnes Beda

Sam Bedwell

Mary Biel

Deng Bom

Chudier Chuol

Mary Chuol

Awuk Deng

Mary Deng

Riek Deng

Sonia Jean Francois

Peter Gak

Sarah Gatdoar

Jim Gilmer

Agnes Hassan

Amina Issa

Mary Johnson

Nyaweche Kailech

Yunis Kur

Nyaduap Lam

Francis Lukolo

Peter Biel Lual

Ester Luwak

Nyayien Malieth

Safa Mohammed

Lam Thot Muang

Patrick Namwembe

Rebecca Nyoach

Abdikadir Osman

John Palpel

Julia Pitia

Mathew Juan Riek

Paul Shepersky

Rebecca Thot

Dep Tuany

Buai Tut

Nyawcu Tut

William Tut

LuAnn Vockeroth

References

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<http://tinyurl.com/l9zv376>

- [2] California Department of Social Services (2017)
Refugee-Impacted Counties
<http://tinyurl.com/krukxwu>

- [3] California Department of Social Services (2017)
California Refugee Arrivals Data
<http://tinyurl.com/mjutals>

- [4] County of San Diego, Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA) (2017)
Resettlement Agencies Arrivals in San Diego County by Country of Origin (FFY 2012–2016)

- [5] Nile Sisters Development Initiative (2017)
Refugees by Numbers
<http://tinyurl.com/lozw9nw>

- [6] Raftery, M. (2011)
Little Mogadishu: From East Africa to East San Diego
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- [7] California Department of Public Health (2015)
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- [8] United States. Public Health Service Office of the Surgeon General,
Center for Mental Health Service, National Institute of Mental Health (US) (1999)
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<http://tinyurl.com/kkqe636>