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Working with Refugee and Immigrant Populations

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Special Presentation by Brenda Portillo

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As Director of Refugee & Immigrant Services, Leslie Aizenman oversees the activities of the agency's refugee resettlement program from pre-arrival through early integration into our Pittsburgh region. Activities for these individuals and families, who have received humanitarian aid from the U.S. government to start new lives in America, include intensive case management, social service and vocational support, cultural orientation and referrals to myriad community partners. Her work also entails extensive outreach and education about refugees and resettlement to the “receiving” community of Pittsburgh residents, service and educational providers of all kinds, and the ethnic and faith-based community. Prior to assuming this position Ms. Aizenman served as the Jewish Family & Children's Service’s (JF&CS) grant writer and project developer.

Ms. Aizenman's educational background is in writing. Before joining JF&CS, she held numerous positions in the publishing field including managing editor for the nonprofit literary journal Creative Nonfiction, reporter/research for Inc. Magazine and copy editor for Dow Jones News Services. Ms. Aizenman holds a bachelor's degree in communications from Boston University and a master's degree in public policy and management (MPPM) from the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs.
Ms. Aizenman is co-chair of the Immigrants & Internationals Advisory Council, an initiative of Allegheny County Department of Human Services. She is also a member of UPMC’s Inclusion and Diversity Committee, the Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh, the Regional Health Literacy Coalition, and the University of Pittsburgh’s Master’s in Public Policy and Management Advisory Council of the Graduate School of Public & International Affairs.

Ms. Aizenman received the Nelson Mandela Leadership and Diversity Award from Afrika Yetu and the African Community. She is also a recipient of the Humanity Day Award from the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh.

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Courtney Macurak, MSW is the Director of Programs at South Hills Interfaith Movement (SHIM). SHIM was created nearly fifty years ago by a priest, a rabbi, and a minister as an interfaith ministry. SHIM has been providing food, clothing and services to people in need in Pittsburgh’s southern suburban neighborhoods ever since. Faced with unprecedented new levels of suburban poverty, SHIM has been expanding its work to include helping more neighbors in need.

Together, with teams of dedicated volunteers, donors and partners, SHIM is working to reduce the devastating effects of suburban poverty among the working poor, unemployed, families, single parents, senior citizens, women, and the high concentration of refugee families in their service area.

The South Hills is home to the largest community of refugees in the Pittsburgh region. SHIM is committed to providing support for these families who have settled in the United States to make a better life for themselves. Programs for refugees include Immigrant Services and Connections (ISAC), in addition to programs for the whole community that benefit refugees such as, the Family Support Center, Youth Mentoring, Early Childhood Program, After School Program, and Ruling Our eXperiences.

ISAC assists refugees and immigrants in accessing existing services which provide shelter, education, healthcare, and legal support in Allegheny County. As one of six sites in the multi-agency partnership coordinated by Jewish Family & Children’s Service of Pittsburgh, SHIM provides information and referral services; has a staff that includes service coordinators, bilingual navigators; and a multi-lingual central telephone line to enhance communication.

For nearly 50 years, SHIM’s programs have evolved to meet the changing needs of the community. They have served more than 4,000 people in 2015 at their two program sites: SHIM Center in Bethel Park and SHIM Family Center at Prospect Park, and have plans for future growth.

SHIM continues to address the effects of suburban poverty through helping clients meet basic needs through clothing, food, and utility assistance; and achieving self-sufficiency through education and training. They are dedicated to building community through educational programs, advocacy, and community partnerships.
South Hills Interfaith Ministries expands to better meet community needs

By Shannon M. Nass

South Hills Interfaith Ministries plans to increase its impact on the South Hills by expanding its leadership team.

The organization recently announced the promotion and hiring of three key individuals.

Current staff members Ilene Potashman Cohen and Courtney Macurak will serve as director of philanthropic engagement and director of programs respectively, and Linda Lewis was hired as director of finance and administration.

The changes came on the heels of an 18-month feasibility study conducted by the organization along with its board of directors, community leaders, and stakeholders to identify ways to better address the evolving needs in the South Hills region.

Results showed that the needs for services in the South Hills reached far beyond the organization’s current capacities.

“Suburban poverty continues to rise and has been doing that since 2005,” executive director Jim Guffey said. “As we recover from the Great Recession that came upon southwestern Pennsylvania, struggles in the suburban setting continue to be a challenge for families that live here in the South Hills.”

As the recession settled in, he said many educated, middle class families that were doing well may have lost one or both jobs. While expenses may not have changed or increased, revenues possibly decreased.

One of the challenges of addressing suburban poverty, Mr. Guffey said, is the “silence aspect” of families not wanting others to know that they are struggling, which can make reaching out for help difficult.

A growing senior population in the South Hills and the need for better public transportation were also reinforced through the study. Transportation can be a barrier, Mr. Guffey said, as a car is vital in a suburban setting and can add to expenses.

As part of their strategic plan to address these needs, Mr. Guffey said they looked at their current structure from a business standpoint to ensure they are maximizing their support and offering the greatest return on investment.

Current programs were also evaluated and new programs are being considered as well.
Going forward, he said they are looking to partner with other organizations to make a greater impact on handling basic needs.

A new communications and branding strategy will also launch later this month that will increase the organization’s social media presence and better communicate the needs of the community.

He said there will be strategies going forward to grow and meet those needs once they are communicated.

The organization currently provides assistance with food, clothing and utilities and a variety of family support programs such as financial literacy classes, an early childhood program, a summer day camp, and a family support center.

Once these basic needs are met, Mr. Guffey said the goal is to improve self-sufficiency.

“Bad things happen to good people all the time, so we need to make sure that we’re having those conversations with people on how they go forward,” he said.

Mr. Guffey said that over the last 15 years the organization has also carved out a niche of being a go-to agency to support a growing foreign-born population. Many come to the South Hills already struggling, he said, so the organization assists families to the best of its abilities, including educating them on customs, laws and language.

The nonprofit organization was founded in 1958 and will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2018.

“We’ve made it through the first 50 years and we’ve met a lot of needs in the community,” Mr. Guffey said. “We need to be positioned for the next 50 years, and this restructuring will allow us to be far more efficient and far more effective as we look across the spectrums as to how we deploy the resources that we have.”