



**CITY OF PORTLAND**  
**Social Services Division**  
**Aaron Geyer, Director**

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** The members of the Health & Human Services and Public Safety Committee

**FROM:** Aaron Geyer, Social Services Division Director

**DATE:** October 4, 2021

**RE:** Asylum Seeker and Resettlement Update

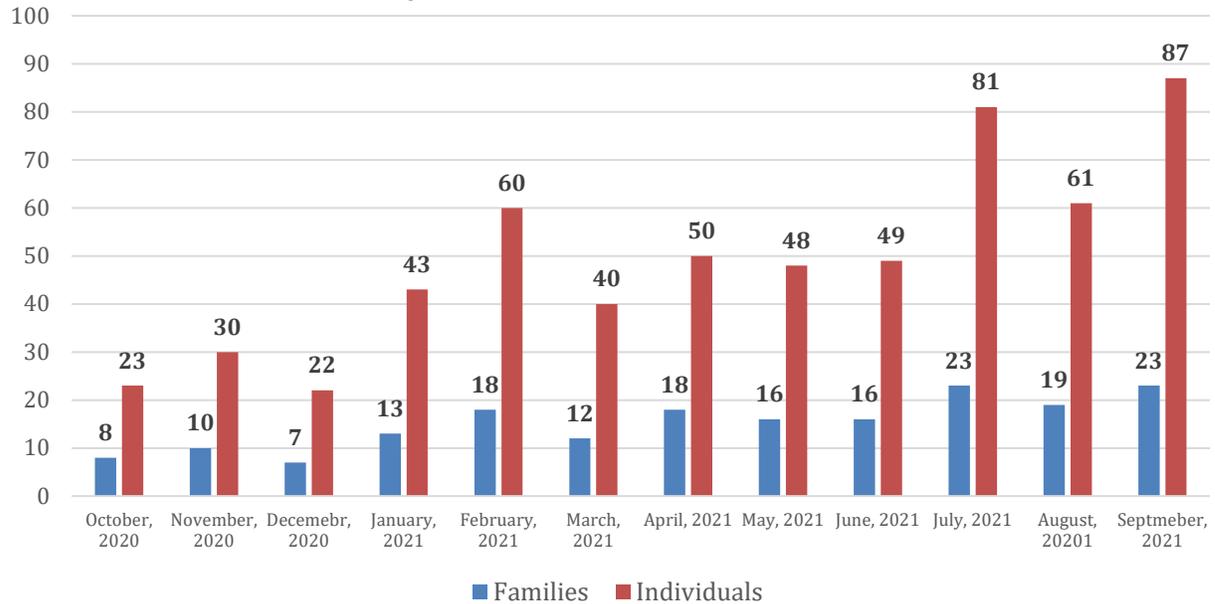
---

At the September 28th Health & Human Services and Public Safety meeting, Councilor Dion requested an update on asylum seekers, the current landscape at the hotels sheltering families and the number of new arrivals the City is seeing.

Currently, we have 31 families for 88 individuals on-site at the family shelter with four rooms open to absorb after-hours arrivals. Hotels, which are paid and processed through Portland's General Assistance, have a census of 119 families for 390 people. The 478 individuals in families sheltered by the City exceeds the total number of individuals assisted in the summer of 2019, when the City opened the Expo. The families are being served across three hotels and as of last week, these hotels have reached capacity. With capacity at both the shelter and area hotels being reached, we continue to connect with hotel owners in an attempt to locate additional rooms to shelter families. We have reached out to hotels in Westbrook, Portland, Scarborough, Auburn as well as the Old Orchard Beach Chamber of Commerce to gauge membership interest with regard to potential winter rentals. Capacity remains our greatest challenge; as we've seen contracted hotels in other municipalities across the State close, we've seen a corresponding uptick in the number of individuals and families requesting shelter in the form of hotel rooms in Portland. Just last week we received an email from a neighboring municipality because they had three families requesting shelter and all the hotels were full. An additional related concern is that municipal officials in other towns have expressed and outlined concerns that the use of hotels for sheltering could put the hotel in violation. The specific concern was to ensure that all hotels are fully compliant with their licensing requirement, ensure none become in violation of the Disorderly House ordinance, and ensure that properties with land use approval for temporary lodging do not become de facto long term housing units i.e. dwellings, in violation of their site plan approval.

The chart below shows monthly asylum seeker intakes at hotels going back one year:

## Asylum Seeker Hotel Intakes



In the summer of 2019, we established connections with organizations at the Southern border who have kept us apprised of the situation there to better help us anticipate arrivals and trends. These connections include Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (Raices), the International Rescue Committee in Arizona, and Casa Marianella, an Austin, TX nonprofit. In addition to families coming from the Southern border, other families enter the US on a visa by plane or travelling to Portland after having initially settled in another location where services and housing options were more limited. Val Verde Border Humanitarian Coalition connected with our new Resettlement Coordinator, Chelsea Hoskins, in August 2021 to send a family to Portland. During this conversation, they reported that on one August day they had 400 people come through their program in Del Rio, TX. They serve people who cross the border, primarily from Central America, however they continue to see and accept families from Haiti who traditionally ask to be relocated to FL, and Central Africans, primarily DRC, who request to be sent to Portland, ME. Most of our arrivals are from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Funded with Cumberland County CDBG dollars, the new Resettlement Coordinator position works to coordinate services, orientation, and long-term placements for newly arriving homeless families who present to the City for assistance. Immediate goals of the position are to streamline and organize services and resources, coordinate referrals, and partner with external community providers and municipal programs to determine feasible housing options for resettlement with wraparound support options while families are working toward securing housing. Currently, families are averaging about a five-month stay in hotels before admission to the shelter; it then takes an average of four months to secure housing and exit the shelter. Initial efforts toward the position goals began with a meeting held on 9/24/21, with approximately 52 attendees who joined the call. Attendees represented a variety of providers including not only formalized agencies and programs, but also church pastors and community leaders. The goal of this meeting was to determine the capacity of current providers on the ground, reduce duplication of services, streamline immediate needs through collaboration efforts, and identify long term planning goals.

Attendees formed subcommittees across the most immediate and basic needs such as: food access and distribution efforts, planning and preparing a winter clothing drive, and

streamlining medical access. They identified immediate gaps and developed processes on a trial basis to meet those needs which could be resolved creatively. These include developing a process to access emergency medical care while residing at a hotel, identifying and creating a schedule for triage case management for new families entering the hotel, and developing a tool that families and providers can utilize to reduce duplication efforts as families connect with numerous providers over the course of their stay. Long term goals for future subcommittees were identified, as well as many gaps in care. Future subcommittees include the large topics of transportation and housing, which are concerns for all providers and families.

Families and individuals not having consistent access to reliable transportation has far reaching impacts, greatly impeding the path to self-sufficiency. Having little to no transportation limits the ability to go to appointments, grocery stores, immigration check-ins, the doctor and pharmacies, and attend ESL classes to name a few. Housing is a critical need as the vast majority of these families do not qualify for subsidized housing, vouchers, or most apartments housed under property management companies. Quality Housing Coalition is working hard to lift these barriers by partnering with private landlords and housing agencies, however the housing availability and placements through this program, and through other private landlords not affiliated with QHC, continue to fall short of the overall housing need. City staff members in the Social Services Division are inundated with work. The General Assistance office has a line of new families waiting to be assisted for hotel placement daily, including weekends, in addition to the 30-40 existing scheduled appointments, and on top of double digit existing hotel reservations to renew. Family Shelter staff members are constantly pulled from their work as caseworkers, to accept and process the continuous flow of new arrivals. With hotels at capacity oftentimes new arriving families are in overflow rooms at the shelter for several days. These trends are cause for concern regarding overflow space, particularly when 4 or more families arrive on the same day.

While community subcommittees meet to address immediate needs, more support and continuity across the named areas above would be hugely beneficial. With the pace of weekly arrivals, additional case management triage is needed by way of community partners, to help ensure that all families receive orientation to area resources and facilitate more expedient enrollment. Although we are streamlining food distribution efforts, the most efficient food process would be pre-cooked meals similar to the format of the Expo, as most hotels do not offer full kitchens for families to prepare meals, relying solely on microwaves for cooking. The amount or availability of food may not be the barrier; many partner agencies are experiencing staffing shortages which impact their ability to cook and deliver hot meals to all the local hotels daily. Greater Portland Health, Maine Medical Center, and the Local Health Officer in South Portland visit hotels on site to enroll families into medical care each week and face similar human resource limitations. The pace of arrivals often surpasses their available time, resulting in families waiting for healthcare enrollment or access.

Health homes are triaging emergent medical needs at this time of contact and support with time sensitive medical intervention. For example, individuals present who have little to no medication left to manage a chronic condition like diabetes, or children who present suffering malnourishment or dehydration from their travels and need to access emergency care upon arrival. Several agency providers identified legal clinics and Immigration attorneys as a large need they are witnessing. ILAP, and other pro bono legal services, provide many resources, and guidance to families and individuals about the asylum process, however as has been the case for many years, the amount of those seeking legal representation simply cannot be met with the resources available. Families and individuals are in need of instruction related to their ICE check-in process, as well as language support to complete proper check-ins, and guidance related to their immigration documents and status, as processes change quickly.

In the time of COVID we are all keenly aware of the importance of being able to conduct business virtually, or by phone. Many families do not have phones or phone plans which allow for unlimited data or minutes for calls. Few resources are available which can fill this need. Families and individuals are in need of working phones to ensure they can receive phone calls from their medical providers, complete immigration phone check-ins, connect with their child's school, or even access virtual resources such as self-help materials on ILAP's website, or online ESL classes.

Since the community partner meeting convened on September 24th, efforts are underway to attempt to fill gaps in service, with a renewed appreciation for everyone working in this space. However, even with all of the combined efforts the sheer number of individuals in need of support continue to stretch available resources. City staff members working closely with families continue to be informed that families are en route to Portland on a weekly basis. Over the past three weeks alone, we have received 28 families. Many of those who arrive in Maine have identified Portland's Family Shelter as their final destination, even before they cross the border into the United States. Additionally, many asylum seekers also report their intention is to relocate to Canada once they feel confident they will be accepted at the border.

**196 Lancaster Street • Portland, ME 04101 • 207-482-5131**

**[aeg@portlandmaine.gov](mailto:aeg@portlandmaine.gov) • [www.portlandmaine.gov](http://www.portlandmaine.gov)**