



San Diego Rapid Response Network Migrant Shelter Services | Narrative Work

The following is an excerpt from Jewish Family Service of San Diego's upcoming white paper on San Diego Rapid Response Network Migrant Shelter Services. The full white paper will be linked here when available, as well as published on www.rapidresponsesd.org and www.jfssd.org.

Crisis. Surge. Illegal. When it comes to the process of people seeking asylum in the U.S., there is an abundance of misinformation and negative rhetoric in public discourse. The reality and truth of the work, however, is grounded in a welcoming approach centered on humanity. *Welcoming the Stranger.*

In addition to doing the work, the San Diego Rapid Response Network (SDRRN), Jewish Family Service of San Diego (JFSSD), partners and funders, have made it their mission to communicate the real stories of individuals and families seeking asylum and the vital network of support – shelter staff, attorneys, volunteers, government entities and officials, community and social service organizations and private philanthropy – that makes this work possible.

This narrative change work, with emphasis on working with elected officials and the media, has helped influence public policy, advocacy, public and private funding, and employment and volunteer recruitment, while also bolstering the morale and drive of those the shelter serves and people within the network of support listed above.

As one pregnant woman seeking asylum said after her story was told in the media, "*Llore, final alguien me está escuchando*" – "I cried. Finally, someone is listening to me."

Created to further collate around the issue, JFSSD is also a core partner of the California Welcoming Task Force, a binational coalition dedicated to re-envisioning how the U.S. can welcome people seeking asylum safely and expeditiously at our border by coordinating across sectors: humanitarian, legal, health, advocacy and communications. The coalition was created in response to the incoming Biden Administration and potential changes to the asylum system as a result. Communications work includes promoting positive narratives about the borderlands and accurate messaging for impacted communities.

Elected Officials

SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services is not possible without the support of elected officials. At all levels of government, elected officials can impact critical components of this work, including immigration policy and advocacy, funding and resource allocation. They also have a key voice in the ongoing discourse about people seeking asylum and immigration systems.

SDRRN and JFSSD work to keep elected officials informed and actively engaged. Efforts include:

- **Background materials**, including shelter backgrounder/fact sheets, advocacy requests and suggested messaging. These materials provide elected offices with accurate, timely information about SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services and related policy and immigration issues. Updated items are regularly distributed and available upon request.
- **Information sessions**. The SDRRN team briefed elected offices on a recurring basis, to provide general and specific updates, including fast-moving issues, such as the Migrant Protection Protocols 1.0 and 2.0. These sessions allow everyone to hear from those on-the-ground and ask questions that have been posed by their constituents. In addition, these meetings offer another opportunity to emphasize SDRRN's calls to action for public and political support. Briefings are also held at the request of various government entities, including committees, on-on-one meetings and shelter operation tours with local, state and federal elected officials and representatives from their offices.
- **Update emails**. For brief or urgent updates, SDRRN and JFSSD send emails to elected offices at all levels to let them know of the latest statistics; operations on the ground, including if the respite shelters reach capacity and are not able to assist all migrants (i.e. "street releases"); and any new requests for support. These emails are accompanied by the latest backgrounder, along with relevant advocacy requests and messaging.

Through these efforts, SDRRN and JFSSD have been able to establish political champions who are willing to lead discussions around key issues, advocate for system change and direct critical funding.

PR Operations

Internal leadership and marketing teams also meet with the PR team on a weekly basis to discuss needs and messaging. The PR team is consistently reviewing the tools above to determine which tactic will be most effective to get out specific messages.

JWC's constant challenge is to fulfill requests from the media and help them get stories and content to educate their audiences, while balancing the privacy of shelter guests and not hindering the important work of shelter staff and volunteers.

Over the past four-plus years, SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services has been featured in hundreds of stories, with significant national/international coverage including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, NPR, Associated Press, VICE News, CNN, China Daily, Politico, Univision and Telemundo National, Fox News and more. The shelter has become the go-to resource in San Diego (and beyond) for the media at large about asylum seekers and migrant shelters.

In addition to the elected support above, donors at all levels have cited the resulting articles with their donations, from \$20 to \$500,000, with gifts often timed with publication dates.

Media Relations

SDRRN and JFSSD contracted its public relations partner, J. Walcher Communications (JWC), to oversee media relations – from local to international. The PR team receives at least 1-3 media queries every day, with increased requests during pivotal immigration moments, such as the implementation and end of Title 42. Regular activities include:

- **Press materials**, including a backgrounder, bios and weekly shelter stat infographics. Many of the most common questions from media can be answered by the backgrounder, which helps streamline responses. JWC explains issues in layman's terms that target audiences can understand and breaks down complex issues with stories/quotes from clients, attorneys and those on the front lines to bring a human face to the issue. JWC works with the data team for the latest statistics. The PR team also regularly educates the press about the difference between an asylum seeker, refugee and other forms of immigration.
- **Incoming media requests**, including fielding requests and providing accurate information; giving background interviews; and coordinating stories, interviews and tours. The team developed a media form that helps them vet opportunities, including scope of story and deadline. This work often means the PR team is declining requests or directing media to alternate resources, based on SDRRN/JFSSD leadership capacity, as well as the desire to focus on narrative change work. This sometimes includes coordinating with media outlets that may not traditionally be sympathetic to the issue, using these stories as opportunities for education and awareness.
- **Media story pitching**, including coordinating exclusive and longer form stories. JWC has established strong relationships with key local and national media, providing them with accurate and timely information and interviews on behalf of SDRRN and JFSSD. As a result, the media regularly contacts the PR team for story/interview requests, fact checking and updates.
- **Press conferences**, both in-person and virtual. SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services makes judicious use of press conferences on its own or with key partners, as a co-host or participant, to share major announcements, advocate for policy change and provide updates on the ever-changing immigration landscape. The PR team works to secure a good mix of speakers, including SDRRN/JFSSD leadership, elected officials, on-the-ground representatives (e.g. medical professionals, faith leaders, attorneys, etc.) and people seeking asylum, as appropriate.
- **Media statements**, both reactive and proactive, **and messaging** to respond to issues that SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services wants to comment on or would be asked to speak on, including policy changes, migrant issues and rights, legal cases, and more. The PR team produces and disseminates strong, succinct statements to the media, with calls-to-action for public support. JWC also provides media training to key leadership and staff to ensure consistent messaging and assist in deflecting or bridging tough questions.
- **Opinion pieces**. A wide range of SDRRN and JFSSD representatives, along with medical professionals, volunteers and people seeking asylum, have written opinion pieces to explain the realities of the immigration process and their personal stories, with strong calls to action. These pieces are often written with the assistance of the PR team and encourage readers to contact their elected officials to advocate for change, donate, become volunteers and recognize the contributions of immigrants within our society.

- **Media protocols.** Media protocols are necessary to work with this highly vulnerable and sensitive population who also draw strong polarizing feelings by some individuals and groups. Establishing these protocols ensured treatment was uniform for all requests and included procedures for the media, public officials and other visitors who may want to speak or post publicly about their visits to SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services.

Protocols direct staff, media, public offices and visitors about what can and cannot be photographed or filmed and what information needs to be kept private. Key rules include that no person seeking asylum may be approached or featured in any way without prior coordination from a JFS or JWC representative. All visitors are asked to keep the locations, addresses and names of all sites confidential, including key location features that would identify them.

The PR team created a script and media card that is handed out to any media who arrive at any of JFSSD's locations without prior approval, letting them know that all visits must be pre-approved and to contact the general email on the card to request access.

- **Media coverage and narrative research and monitoring** included reviewing coverage from all sides of the debate and rhetoric that could negatively harm operations or pose security risks.

Tour Strategy

SDRRN and JFSSD are intentionally welcoming and open to providing tours to government and non-governmental stakeholders and institutional funders of its various shelter operations facilities, while greatly respecting the privacy, safety and dignity of guests. This is an extension of the organizations' "Welcoming the Stranger" mentality and their narrative work to demonstrate the realities, needs and humanity of providing respite care to people seeking asylum.

The shelter's visitors have included elected officials from both sides of the aisle, dignitaries, nonprofit organizations at every level, humanitarians and well-known social justice advocates who have all left with a deeper understanding and appreciation for the work. Most of these tours are not for media or public exposure, but for education and advocacy.