

*“They’ve all come to look for America”:*

*Refugee Resettlement and Employment in the United States*

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### **A story**

“My wife needs to learn English. They want my wife to clean bathrooms... but it is not right for her to clean bathrooms.” That’s what Paul, a refugee from Cameroon, told me the first time I visited his house.<sup>1</sup> My job was to tutor his wife, Marie, who had recently joined him in Richmond, Virginia. She had been in the country for four months and spoke hardly any English, although her four children had picked it up more quickly. Marie and Paul both hoped that two months of English instruction would be enough to help Marie return to her former career in social work. Paul, who had been a minister and journalist before fleeing Cameroon, was working as a night-shift security guard.

I worked with Marie for two months, communicating primarily in our literal lingua franca: French. During this time, I talked to her eldest son about his ambitions to get a PhD and become an astronaut—but the public high school made him take classes for English as a Second Language all day. I witnessed Marie’s frustration at being continually ignored by her landlord when the second-floor toilet sprang a leak and dripped all the way through the ceiling below. I listened to her cry when she

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed.

told me that she did not know whether or not her mother was still alive. I taught her English: she placed into the intermediate level on the same literacy test she'd initially been unable to complete. But she didn't get a job... not even cleaning bathrooms.

Being a refugee in America is not particularly fun. The challenges of everyday living are several times harder when one factors in the language barrier, culture shock, limited access to transportation and mental health concerns as a result of experiences prior to arriving in America. There are systems in place to help refugees with most basic needs, but many of these agencies—be they nonprofit or government-run—are overwhelmed and underfunded.

The current system strives to ensure that refugees are economically self-sufficient: that they are able to pay bills when their cash grants run out after the first few months. This goal, which is set by the federal government, is important—but on its own, it is too narrow and does not provide for the array of needs refugees bring. A more just form of resettlement would integrate refugees more completely into American society. Because refugees come to America with so many needs, the focus of resettlement should be more holistic to account for refugee adjustment, empowerment and inclusion in the community. To achieve this new goal and serve refugees more effectively, resettlement agencies and local institutions, whose resources are stretched to provide the bare minimum, need more assistance from the federal and state governments.

## **Distinction between refugees and immigrants**

Refugees are not immigrants. Immigrants choose to come to America and are usually able to go home if they choose. Before they leave, they prepare the best they can to overcome any challenges they expect to face. By contrast, external forces require refugees to leave home—and they typically have no hope of returning. According to one resettlement agency in a document provided to volunteers, “[Refugees’] destinies are linked to international politics and diplomacy and to the situation in their home country.”<sup>2</sup> Their experiences before and after arriving in refugee camps are traumatic and outside their control. Because of the circumstances surrounding their emigration, refugees are significantly less prepared than immigrants to start a new life in America. Therefore, refugee status is important: resettlement countries offer refugees additional resources and privileges not granted to immigrants. Refugees receive guidance from assigned caseworkers, free English classes and help with getting a job. They are also eligible for federal cash assistance and health coverage, while immigrants are not.

Meanwhile, refugees must fulfill certain obligations if they are to continue receiving this assistance. Under international law, the only duty refugees have is to obey the laws of their host countries just as any other citizen or immigrant would.<sup>3</sup> The United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees, a guiding set of international policies adopted in 1951, does not allow a country to demand more of refugees in its borders than of its citizens. The interpretation in America is that

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<sup>2</sup> Refugee and Immigrant Services, “Refugee Resettlement Processing Procedure.”

<sup>3</sup> Hathaway, 98.

refugees must remain on good behavior. Skipping English classes and job interviews, or refusing to accept an offer of employment, are examples of actions that could terminate cash assistance.

### **International rights of refugees**

The distinction between refugees and immigrants also entails a legal component. When most people move to a different country, for whatever reason, their rights and the rules governing their nationality are a result of negotiation between the two countries concerned.<sup>4</sup> A country will grant rights to immigrants from a second country in hopes of reciprocity: the second country will grant rights to the first country's citizens in return.<sup>5</sup> Refugees, who lack a legal nationality, are more vulnerable: they have no home country that will advocate for their rights. Therefore, refugees deserve special surrogate protection, which the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees provides.<sup>6</sup>

To receive the protection, one must fit the official definition of a refugee. In 1951, the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees defined a refugee as someone who cannot be protected by his or her country of nationality "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion."<sup>7</sup> A refugee can also be someone who does not have a legal nationality and is "unable or... unwilling to return" to "the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 78-9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 193.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 96.

country of his former habitual residence.”<sup>8</sup> This definition, written in response to the aftermath of World War II, is used by most nations, including the United States.<sup>9</sup>

The only definition in practice that significantly differs from that of the UN is the one used by the Organization of African Unity. In addition to the UN’s criteria, the OAU allows for people fleeing their home countries “owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order.”<sup>10</sup>

Unlike the UN’s definition, it states that people can lose their relationship with their home country via foreign intervention and domestic weakness.<sup>11</sup> It is more universal than the UN definition, but more narrow than a scholarly definition such as that used by Andrew Shacknove. For Shacknove, a lost connection with the home nation—which no longer provides protection or basic needs—is the critical factor for defining a refugee.<sup>12</sup> He does not think that the way one loses the connection is important. However, to receive official refugee status and protection from the UN, refugees must prove a well-founded fear of persecution.

The concept of an international obligation to protect refugees is relatively new. The UN’s predecessor, the League of Nations, was the first international body to ensure refugee rights; it did so in 1933, although only eight countries, including the United States, ratified the treaty.<sup>13</sup> The 1951 Convention held by the UN standardized refugees’ international rights; since then, more advances in the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> ORR, “Who We Serve.”

<sup>10</sup> Shacknove, 164-5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 165.

<sup>12</sup> Shacknove, 166.

<sup>13</sup> Hathaway, 88.

international law have been made through treaties.<sup>14</sup> For example, the Convention allows countries to restrict protection to refugees from a certain geographic area or from events occurring before 1951. A revised separate agreement, the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, does not allow for such restrictions, although countries that have agreed to one treaty and not to the other have different legal duties.<sup>15</sup> The Convention does not clarify all the obligations that resettlement countries owe refugees, but its spirit is one of compassion and concern for human rights.

The UN's role comes at the beginning of a refugee's journey to America. The High Commission for Refugees sets standards by which a person in a camp is considered a refugee.<sup>16</sup> Refugees trying to leave the camps have three options: repatriation (returning to the home country), nationalization (becoming legal citizens of the country in which their refugee camp is located, which typically neighbors the home country), and resettlement. The latter option entails moving to a designated "resettlement country"—usually Canada, Australia, a country in Europe or the United States. These countries volunteer to accept refugees, although they can limit how many refugees they receive and from which regions. When refugees apply to the UN for resettlement, they indicate to which country they would like to move and are assigned a destination that takes their interests into consideration. Once a family is cleared to go to America, it is directed to the U.S. government.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 95-110.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>16</sup> Merkusheva.

## Determining who comes to America

With a broader definition of 'refugee,' the international community is obligated to provide for more people. Even under the UN definition, numbers are high and do not always agree. According to the UN, there were 15.2 million refugees worldwide in both 2008 and 2009.<sup>17</sup> Yet the United States Department of State cites the UN when it says there are 10.5 million refugees.<sup>18</sup> Because of the transient nature of refugee camps and the continual social upheavals that cause people to flee their home countries, it is difficult to have a precise number. Nonetheless, only one percent of the total refugees are resettled to the United States, Canada, Australia and many European countries.<sup>19</sup> Many remain in the camps indefinitely.

The United States accepts more refugees annually than the other resettlement countries combined, but that number fluctuates depending on both domestic and external situations. Each year, the President sets a cap on the number of refugees who can be resettled. This is determined mostly by cost, so in the early 2000s the number declined.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, following the September 11 attacks in 2001, tightened security was an additional impediment.<sup>21</sup> The additional security screenings<sup>22</sup> created the largest drop in resettlement in 20 years: the government

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<sup>17</sup> UN High Commissioner on Refugees, 4.

<sup>18</sup> US Department of State, "Refugee Resettlement in the United States."

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of State, "United States, Canada and Africa; United States Leads World in Refugee Resettlement."

<sup>21</sup> Sengupta.

<sup>22</sup> These included fingerprinting, new flight procedures and checking all refugees in a database. It is unclear if these procedures are still used.

had set a ceiling of 70,000, but only 27,113 refugees came to America that year.<sup>23</sup>

In the second half of the decade, arrivals increased by several thousand per year. The United States resettled 74,654 refugees in the 2009 fiscal year, with a cap of 75,000.<sup>24</sup> According to Arthur Dewey, the Assistant Secretary of State for Refugees, the United States did “more than its share” in 2004, when it welcomed 54 percent of the refugees sent to a resettlement country.<sup>25</sup> The number of refugees from which that percentage is taken excludes those still in camps, repatriated or nationalized; the vast majority is not resettled.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, resettlement is a significant undertaking that affects the lives of thousands.

Along with setting a ceiling on the number of arrivals, the President allocates resettlement slots by region. This can contain controversy: until 2006, during the Iraq war, the U.S. government set the maximum number of Iraqi refugees allowed at 500 per year.<sup>27</sup> Observers argued that the U.S. should accept more, since many of the Iraqi refugees were suffering because they had supported American troops. Yet allowing more refugees was admitting that the country remained unstable.<sup>28</sup> When more Iraqis were permitted to come to America—over 25,000 between 2006 and 2009—they faced further disappointment in the many challenges common to refugees.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Marquis.

<sup>24</sup> ORR, “Refugee Arrival Data.”

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Department of State, “United States, Canada and Africa; United States Leads World in Refugee Resettlement.”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Lam.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Jonsson and Chick.



## **American policy and bureaucracy**

The United States holds its annual public discussion of refugee resettlement on June 20, World Refugee Day. It seems that newspapers publish more articles on refugees around that date than at any other time of year. However, refugees are constantly coming to America. The Refugee Act, passed by Congress in 1980, governs the whole project. The Act focuses primarily on employment and self-sufficiency, which it hopes to achieve with federal planning and local assistance. Its goal is to help refugees find jobs, provide English lessons, and assist with general case management. Several federal agencies work toward this goal.

The Department of State's Bureau of Population, Migration and Refugees works with overseas refugee processing and sets resettlement priorities.<sup>30</sup> The Office of Refugee Resettlement, which manages most practical aspects of resettlement, is under the Department of Health and Human Services. It works on education and social services, manages federal grants and oversees volunteer agencies, state and local governments.<sup>31</sup> States are responsible for designing and implementing the services available to refugees. They can also make requests about refugee placement to the ORR, which makes the final decision. According to the Act, the goal is to put refugees in a city where they will be likely to become self-sufficient. The criteria for placement, according to the Act, include that the area is not already overwhelmed with refugees, has volunteer agencies that will help and offers adequate resources including employment opportunities and inexpensive

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<sup>30</sup> The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security manages the legal aspect of refugee status.

<sup>31</sup> Refugee and Immigrant Services, "Refugee Resettlement Processing Procedure."

housing.<sup>32</sup>

Resettlement agencies orchestrate the majority of the process once refugees have arrived. Many of these agencies are faith-based, such as the United States Catholic Conference/ Migration and Refugee Services, the Church World Service and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. However, other agencies—like Immigration and Refugee Services of America and the International Rescue Committee—are not associated with a particular religion.<sup>33</sup> All of these domestic resettlement agencies have branches in various regions—for example, the Catholic Diocese of Richmond is part of USCC/MRS. The diocese operates field offices in Roanoke, Norfolk and Richmond, Va.<sup>34</sup> As a refugee family goes through the system for placement, it is assigned to a country, a resettlement agency, a region and finally to a field office—which is located in the city where the family will live. After being assigned to a city, refugees must go through final medical and processing clearances, which can take up to a year.<sup>35</sup> The clearances ensure that refugees are not a medical burden or security threat.

It is the Federal government’s responsibility to ensure that sufficient medical staff is available for refugees’ screening, and that they receive any necessary treatment from the local agencies. In return, the agencies have to report their progress. The agencies directly provide basic needs, described in the act as “including food, clothing, shelter, and transportation for job interviews and

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<sup>32</sup> ORR, “The Refugee Act.”

<sup>33</sup> Refugee and Immigrant Services, “Refugee Resettlement Processing Procedure.”

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

training.”<sup>36</sup> They are also responsible for making sure refugees are aware of U.S. laws and customs, and that they receive English language instruction.<sup>37</sup> In practice, agencies and communities do most of the work once refugees arrive. The federal government evaluates an agency’s performance on its ability to “reduce welfare dependency among refugees resettled by that agency”—the primary goal of the entire resettlement program—as well as its cooperation with other agencies and the government.<sup>38</sup>

### **The cost of resettlement**

Cost is one of the biggest factors that policymakers cite as keeping the U.S. from accepting more refugees. When they come to America, refugees receive benefits that are available to low-income American citizens for as long as they are financially eligible. These benefits include Temporary Aid to Needy Families and Electronic Benefit Transfers, better known as food stamps.<sup>39</sup> Beginning in 2014, refugees will be covered by the Affordable Care Act of 2010 (better known as health care reform). In addition to other benefits, refugees younger than 26 and older than 65 will receive Medicaid coverage.<sup>40</sup> Eligibility for the safety net is an advantage of being a refugee; immigrants are excluded from these programs.

Refugees who are young and particularly employable can also opt into the MATCH program with the agency’s recommendation. This program offers additional

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<sup>36</sup> ORR, “The Refugee Act.”

<sup>37</sup> Refugee and Immigrant Services, “Refugee Resettlement Processing Procedure.”

<sup>38</sup> ORR, “The Refugee Act.”

<sup>39</sup> TANF is only available to families with children.

<sup>40</sup> ORR, “State Letter #11-01.”

federal assistance toward the goal of employment within four months. However, if they miss more than three sessions of English as a Second Language, refugees lose TANF, EBT and MATCH benefits.

Refugees also receive many different kinds of government-administered assistance that is unique to their status. Refugee Medical Assistance, distributed through local Departments of Social Services, is available to those who are financially eligible for Medicaid or SCHIP<sup>41</sup> but do not meet the programs' other requirements.<sup>42</sup> Refugee Cash Assistance is a one-time grant of \$900 per person from the U.S. State Department, which helps pay the bills until they find jobs. It is available to refugees who do not meet the demographic requirements of other kinds of cash assistance, like Aid to the Blind or Social Security Insurance; in practice, almost all refugees receive this RCA.<sup>43</sup> In Richmond, Commonwealth Catholic Charities used most of this grant toward apartment and utilities deposits, furniture and the initial trip to the grocery store. According to CCC's calculations, a family of four receives \$3600 from RCA—and \$1,765 is spent before the family even arrives.<sup>44</sup> The remainder is often enough to live on for only a month or two, which is why agencies prioritize employment.

The plane ticket to America is a loan from the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration that refugees must repay. A family with whom I worked was expected to pay \$39 a month for airfare that was \$1421 per person (for

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<sup>41</sup> SCHIP stands for State Children's Health Insurance Program, which is administered by states but funded with assistance from the Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>42</sup> Virginia Department of Social Services, "Refugee Medical Assistance."

<sup>43</sup> ORR, *Refugee Resettlement Program*, 400.2.

<sup>44</sup> Refugee and Immigrant Services, "Volunteer Handbook."

three adults and one child). However, there is not a strict time limit for repaying the loan, and CCC encouraged refugees to become financially stable before they worried about it.

In the 2010 fiscal year, the State Department's PRM Bureau spent \$336 million on refugee admissions—18 percent<sup>45</sup> of its overall budget.<sup>46</sup> The PRM budget covers the cost of Reception & Placement, Processing and Transportation.<sup>47</sup> The Department of Education allocates money to local school districts that work with refugee children.<sup>48</sup> It also funds resettlement agencies' ESL programs.

In addition to direct aid, refugees receive assistance from their resettlement agencies. These agencies are mostly funded by the states, which receive their money in turn from the ORR. There are two main types of quarterly, federal grants: social services grants and "CMA grants." The latter covers cash assistance, medical assistance and administrative costs.<sup>49</sup> This money is allocated by the states to resettlement agencies and any other programs the states may run. However, federal grants do not help agencies cover the cost of case management.<sup>50</sup> Resettlement agencies also rely on donations that help them set up apartments, including furniture, bedding and kitchen utensils. CCC of Richmond estimates that it spends \$1,600 per family, in addition to the donations it receives.<sup>51</sup> This estimate includes the cost of apartment set-up, deposits, and food for a week. With more money for

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<sup>45</sup> Most of its budget goes toward overseas assistance.

<sup>46</sup> U.S. Department of State. "Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration: FY 2010 Summary of Major Activities."

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Refugee and Immigrant Services, "Refugee Resettlement Processing Procedure."

<sup>49</sup> ORR, *Refugee Resettlement Program*, 400.11.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Refugee and Immigrant Services, "Volunteer Handbook."

case management, agencies would be more able to check up on refugees, drive them to appointments, and provide general assistance and advice.

### **Resettlement in action**

By the time refugees arrive in their new city, they have spent years in refugee camps, trying to get somewhere safe. The application process for resettlement in the United States can easily take a year, but the tumultuous adventure does not end when they land at the airport. Before the refugees' arrival, social workers prepare the apartment with necessities like furniture, trash bags, paper products, cleaning products, toiletries and laundry detergent. Each family also receives enough food for a week, and the grocery list changes based on what foods are typical in their country of origin. The caseworker who picks them up demonstrates how to set an alarm clock and apply deodorant. In the next few days, the caseworker arranges for their health screenings, Social Security cards and federal cash and in-kind assistance.<sup>52</sup> All of these activities are the domain of the nonprofit resettlement agency.

In Richmond, the two main agencies are Commonwealth Catholic Charities (CCC) and Virginia Council of Churches (VCC).<sup>53</sup> The summer that I worked with Marie from Cameroon, I was interning with CCC's Refugee Immigrant Services department. My experience in Richmond, a typical resettlement city, exposed me to the day-to-day operations of an agency. 'Resettlement' is a vague, catch-all term that attempts to include everything these agencies do. The CCC staff includes specialists

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Commonwealth Catholic Charities recently incorporated Refugee Immigrant Services (RIS), which in the time I worked there still operated relatively independently of the rest of CCC.

on employment, English language instruction and education—as well as volunteers who teach English classes, give rides to interviews, accompany refugees to doctors' visits and do anything else imaginable. CCC also employs two caseworkers, who make sure that the families within their care know how to access all the services available for them. In addition to these employees, mentors are available to each family. The mentor's role is to visit the family twice a week, help with grocery shopping, teach driving and banking skills, and be a friend to the family.<sup>54</sup> The goal of the mentorship program is to introduce refugees to a member of the community outside of the agency.

CCC depends not only on its volunteers, but also on volunteer institutions—namely churches. A few churches decide to sponsor particular refugees, and provide much resettlement help like housing and transportation, which is otherwise under CCC's domain. More commonly, churches offer their facilities and organize volunteers to work more directly with CCC, like as mentors. Richmond churches near large concentrations of refugee housing provide classrooms for English instruction. One church opens its computer lab to refugees two mornings a week, so they can do online job applications or practice English with the Rosetta Stone computer program. CCC sends a volunteer to the computer lab, who helps with the technology. Churches are a great community resource and work closely with resettlement agencies, but they cannot provide for all of refugees' needs. Furthermore, a church's availability to help can vary depending on the economy and other missions the church has adopted.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

## **Finding employment**

Once refugees are settled into their new apartment and surroundings, their first order of business is to find a job. Employment is the most concrete measurement of self-reliance, which resettlement agencies list as a priority. As discussed above, refugees can only subsist on their Refugee Cash Assistance money for a month or two, so they need paychecks as soon as possible. While the other benefits refugees receive will continue as long as they are financially eligible, these programs do not provide for a high quality of life. Even finding a job can be difficult, and typically refugees end up in low-wage sectors, no matter their education or skills. Furthermore, the priority that employment receives throughout the resettlement process overshadows concerns such as financial education, mental health and satisfactory housing.

Resettlement agencies provide assistance with writing résumés, submitting applications and going to interviews. The Commonwealth Catholic Charities office in Richmond has an employment specialist who meets with all the refugees of working age shortly after they come to America. A condition to continue receiving assistance is that refugees must apply for every job available and take the first job offered. (They are welcome to move on to a more desirable job at any time, if one becomes available.) The goal is for refugees to earn money and gain experience as soon as possible after their arrival in America. That is why refugees are obligated to apply for every job the agency tells them to, and to take the first one available.



Refugees come with varying levels of education. Some have college degrees, or at least a high school equivalent. Refugee camps often host schools and English classes. However, many other refugees do not even know how to read in their native language, a significant setback on their path to self-sufficiency. Refugees also come with different skill sets: in Richmond, I met computer programmers from Bhutan and farmers from Burma. Marie, the Cameroonian woman I tutored, had been a social worker. Because of this disparity, it is difficult to predict refugees' success in the job market. However, even those with impressive credentials often have difficulty transferring their education and work experience. Most end up getting low-skilled jobs as custodians, fast-food workers or shelvers in grocery stores. These jobs are especially undesirable for refugees with degrees and English skills.

Even getting those low-paying jobs can be difficult. CCC distributes pamphlets encouraging companies to hire refugees, but many will not. For example, the CCC employment specialist told me that Kings Dominion, a theme park outside Richmond, prefers that its employees fit a specific image. Kroger, a grocery store chain, has an online survey as part of its application. The survey consists of statements such as "I have no problem offending people" or "When I need to, I take it easy at work." Applicants mark how they feel about these statements on a range from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." While most native English-speakers would know to "strongly disagree" with the two statements above, someone with a limited understanding of the language would be less sure. Applicants to all jobs at Kroger—even those that do not require customer interaction, such as shelving or cleaning—must complete this survey. Employment trouble can be disastrous for

refugee families trying to pay bills. CCC tried to help refugees by filling out much of the information on applications for them. In Richmond, I spent a few days filling out Kings Dominion applications, using information we had on file: name, address, education and work experience. The employment specialist asked me to fill out the personal response section as well, but after discussion, he agreed that doing so would be dishonest. The employment specialist said that he regretted that he could not sit down with each refugee and go over the application together, but there was not enough labor available. The one specialist served all the refugees under CCC's domain, which easily numbered 100 at the time I was there

The current resettlement process is further complicated by the diversity of the refugees who come. During the Cold War, most refugees came from the Soviet Union, Southeast Asia and Africa. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, many other regions have undergone conflict—and now refugees come to America from as many as 46 distinct regions, comprising 60 nationalities.<sup>55</sup> This diversity drives up the cost of resettlement because there are more language and cultural barriers. It is difficult to find volunteers and translators who speak Nepali or even Arabic, for example. Furthermore, refugees from agricultural countries such as Burma have not even held a pencil before.<sup>56</sup>

While success in finding a job is a positive reinforcement, refugees have needs beyond employment. In Richmond, I visited apartments with broken doors

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<sup>55</sup> U.S. Department of State, "United States, Canada and Africa; United States Leads World in Refugee Resettlement."

<sup>56</sup> Burma is called Myanmar by the ruling junta; many who do not wish to legitimize the oppressive government continue to call the nation Burma. There is controversy within the country as to which is its proper name. Commonwealth Catholic Charities used the name Burma in all of its operations, which is why I also use it.

and stained carpets. There was no talk of mental health, despite the horrific experiences common to refugee camps. The focus on employment, a priority set by the federal government in the Refugee Act, often excludes other, very real, concerns. In practice, the role of addressing these additional needs can fall to outside organizations—or simply lie by the wayside.

### **Role of communities**

Refugees do not interact only with their mentors and caseworkers. The larger community also plays a crucial role in resettlement. Local institutions—including schools, hospitals, churches, police departments and recreational facilities—do not expressly serve refugees, but interact with them as part of their larger mission. For example, a refugee opening a checking account will interact with the bank, but that relationship has nothing to do with the refugee's legal status.

However, other local institutions have to make special accommodations for refugees. Schools have to provide specialized English classes and counselors to meet the needs of refugee children. Churches work with resettlement agencies to supply volunteers and facilities for various events. Aside from a small stipend given to schools that take refugee children by the Department of Education, the federal government does not support these organizations in their roles as resettlement assistants.

Resettlement can overwhelm a community. This is the case in Fredericksburg, Virginia, a small city about an hour away from Richmond. In March 2010, a group of local pastors asked the State Department to stop sending

refugees.<sup>57</sup> The church leaders cited an inability to provide the volunteers and resources expected of them, because of the large number of refugees needing help.<sup>58</sup> That following November, the Fredericksburg school board sent a letter to Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell, asking him to intervene and reduce the number of refugees being sent to Fredericksburg in the next year. The school board said it had contacted the regional resettlement agency, Catholic Charities Migration and Refugee Services (based out of Arlington) with the same request, but to no avail.<sup>59</sup> According to the letter, the school board was overwhelmed with 'high needs' refugee students, who cost about twice as much as an average student.<sup>60</sup> The board was concerned about the lopsided distribution of refugees: half of those sent to the area went to the City of Fredericksburg, which has four schools, while the other half went to Spotsylvania, Stafford and Prince William Counties, which collectively have 150 schools.<sup>61</sup> Fredericksburg has advantages as a location over the rural and subdivided counties that surround it: a busy downtown, public transportation, low-income housing and proximity to two major cities. However, even an ideal resettlement location can become saturated with arrivals. To break this stalemate, the federal government must provide for fewer arrivals or more assistance.

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<sup>57</sup> Umble, "Churches seek an end to influx of refugees."

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Fredericksburg City Public Schools. "Letter to Governor McDonnell."

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

## How much assistance do refugees need?

One of the problems with regulating refugee arrival is that it is impossible to predict what specific needs a family will have before it arrives. The poor economy was an unforeseen factor that has made finding and keeping jobs much more difficult.<sup>62</sup> However, the larger issue at hand is whether or not agencies and volunteers are working together in the best interest of the refugees. Both the Fredericksburg church leaders and the school board framed their concerns as a question of justice. Is it fair to bring more refugees into an area if they will not be adequately cared for?

What does “adequate” mean? The resettlement agency in Fredericksburg said that refugees need ‘tough love’ to become self-sufficient, and that too much nurturing is detrimental to that goal.<sup>63</sup> The churches and volunteers argue that refugees have more needs than the agencies typically acknowledge, citing problems with cultural assimilation and mental health. Even basic needs are not always met, according to church leaders: they cited instances of poorly furnished apartments with only spoiled milk in the refrigerator.<sup>64</sup> Is it the agency’s responsibility to make sure that refugees are properly fed? Technically, it is not. Agencies are supposed to help refugees get their necessary paperwork and assistance, learn English and get a job—nothing more. However, if the U.S. is inviting people to move to its country, it should give a more warm welcome.

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<sup>62</sup> Umble, “Churches seek an end to influx of refugees.”

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Umble, “Refugee resettlement act to get a new look.”

In my experience, it is much easier to be cynical when one works in resettlement every day. Agencies are expected to take care of refugees' well being, which is a broad category. For example, when a refugee in Richmond lost his job and apartment, because of problems with alcoholism, it was his caseworker's job to track him down and take him into detoxification.<sup>65</sup> Even in less extreme cases, agencies have to make sure that refugees are assimilating, that they have transportation to work or to interviews, and that they can pay their bills, among other needs. All of these functions require a significant amount of labor and emotional energy. While Commonwealth Catholic Charities in Richmond has plenty of volunteers, they are not always utilized. Instead of delegating, CCC employees take on much of the responsibility themselves—which creates significant burnout.

More delegation and resources would help the agencies to help the refugees in more ways than simply filling out job applications.

## **Prescriptions**

The decentralized nature of the refugee resettlement system makes evaluating its efficacy difficult and inconclusive. The quality of care refugees receive varies across the country. While some agencies have success in certain areas of resettlement, the government cannot guarantee that such agencies are the norm. Currently, government funding and regulations dictate that agencies prioritize

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<sup>65</sup> Although this was a particularly sad case, it did lead to a humorous episode in the CCC office. The caseworker said that this refugee kept moving from one friend's house to the next. Another employee—who is not a native English speaker—commented, “He’s like an Eskimo.” After a few minutes of confusion, we figured out that he had meant ‘nomad,’ not ‘Eskimo.’

employment above all other factors. This means that, as agencies are often short on resources, they cannot meet other needs that contribute to a healthy, satisfying life. It is important to take a holistic approach to resettlement because refugees, having already suffered so much for reasons outside their control, deserve significant support once they've arrived in America. The federal government, which promises the refugees that they will have a good life, is responsible for increasing the agencies' resources so they can provide better care. (As the system currently expects significant participation from churches and schools, among other institutions, the government should also provide them with additional resources.)

These resources could be increased funding, implementation of successful programs from other agencies, or centralized training for employees and volunteers.

For example, if volunteers are better trained, employees will be more willing to delegate to them and more will get done. More funding would allow for the job search to be more productive; while earning money is important, agencies should be teaching refugees how to apply for jobs and guiding them through the process. By taking a more sophisticated approach to resettlement, the U.S. would be following through on its promises to the many thousands of refugees who come each year, seeking safety and a better life.

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