

**The United States Refugee Resettlement Program:  
A Global Model for Successful Humanitarian Response**  
*Dec. 3, 2015 Forum in Evanston, Illinois*  
Center for Forced Migration Studies, Buffett Institute for Global Studies,  
Northwestern University



Photo: Sarah Williamson for USCCB/MRS

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# #1: Standing by our Mission: *Welcoming the Stranger*

*“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt 25:35).*

## **Thought**

Long before the U.S. Refugee Act in 1980, faith-based organizations like the USCCB/MRS – along with LIRS and HIAS – took it upon themselves to set up war refugee resettlement operations. Beginning in 1920, the national Catholic Church began coordinating the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of immigrants arriving in Ellis Island, helping them find local dioceses and parishes to assist them. As a national voluntary agency coordinating a program with local partners, this founding model formed the basis for the public/private partnership that is the backbone of U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program today.

Todd Scribner: *Negotiating Priorities: The National Catholic Welfare Conference and United States Migration Policy in a Post-World War II World, 1948-1952*. American Catholic Studies, Vol. 121, No. 4 (2010)

Todd Scribner: *Pilgrims of the Night: The American Catholic Church Responds to the Post-World War II Displaced Persons Crisis*. American Catholic Studies, Vol. 124, No. 3, Fall 2013, pp. 1-20

## **Support**

- Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is the official agency of the Catholic Bishops of the United States in the areas of migration and refugee affairs, among other activities. MRS is the largest refugee resettlement agency in the world.
- Since 1975, more than one million refugees have been resettled in the United States through the MRS network. On average, MRS provides per year assistance to 20,000 newcomers who are resettled in the U.S. through its partnership with 93 local diocesan and Catholic Charities agencies.
- The work of MRS is rooted in Catholic Social Teaching and the Scriptures, a tradition of compassion and justice to the poor and vulnerable, and in the belief that the strength of the United States lies in its diverse ethnic and cultural heritage.

## **Further Research**

- Based on organizational history and mission, which specific message resonates most with MRS constituents regarding community support for refugee resettlement?



## #2: Community Support Matters: *Increasing Parish/Community Volunteerism*

### **Thought**

Agencies with religious affiliations provide additional socio-economic support. The history of the U.S. resettlement program shows that parish/community volunteer support is an asset to organizational capacity building and increases the quality of refugee services.

### **Support**

In 2010, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services launched the *Parishes Organized to Welcome Refugees* (POWR) program, to strengthen its support of church and community involvement in work for newcomers.

- Recruited 11,000 new volunteers.
- Formed more than 280 new parish and community partnerships.
- Created new social service and parish mentorship programs tackling transportation, housing, jobs, and food, and language, legal and health care issues.

USCCB/MRS POWR Program Data

USCCB/MRS POWR Post – Bi-Monthly Newsletter (Parishes Organized to Welcome Refugees Program E-Newsletter). 2010-15.

### **Further Research**

- What is the actual contribution of parish volunteers?
- Which strategies are most effective in increasing parish volunteer support?

### **POWR Success Story: Refugee Ambassador Program**



In Indianapolis, Indiana, a partnership between POWR and Catholic High Schools is an example of POWR's energizing effects. Students serve as Refugee Ambassadors and receive service learning credits. The "Refugee Ambassador Program" provides students with information on refugee resettlement and the rich traditions of each culture. In turn, the students act as liaisons for their high schools and home parishes. All generated donations are used to improve integration programs, i.e. language and job readiness training programs.

### #3: Capitalize on Genuine Strength of U.S. Resettlement – *Work as Cornerstone of Community Integration*

#### **Thought**

Finding work and achieving self-sufficiency is not only the cornerstone of the U.S. Refugee Resettlement System. It is also the single most important goal of individuals who have fled from war and trauma. Thus, refugees' inability to find work is a major impediment to their integration.

Richard Mollica: *Healing Invisible Wounds* (Harcourt, 2006).

Daniel Sturm, Work: A Cure for Trauma. *RefugeeWorks Employment Quarterly* #31, 2009.



#### **Support**

Qualitative survey of Somali refugees who have been resettled to London (UK) vs. Minneapolis (U.S.):

“In London, 90% of the respondents were unemployed compared with 26% in Minneapolis.”

Nasir Warfa, Sarah Curtis: *Migration Experiences, Employment Status and Psychological Distress among Somali Immigrants: A Mixed-method International Study*, 2014.

**In most countries, though, unemployment rates are higher among the foreign- than the native-born, whether men or women. There are some noteworthy exceptions, such as the settlement countries, the United States, Chile, and a few Central European countries [...], where rates are low in international comparisons.**

OECD/European Union 2015: *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2015 Settling In*, p. 88

#### **Recommendation**

The Matching Grant (MG) Program is an alternative to public cash assistance for newly arrived refugees. The program provides services to enable refugees to become economically self-sufficient within their first six months in the United States. Self-sufficiency must be achieved without accessing public cash assistance. The program requires an investment of private resources to “match” its federal funds and, therefore, secures the tangible support of local communities and employers that value the program’s contribution. Although this program has proven to be highly successful, with a self-sufficiency rate of 76% for its participants, current government funding limitations preclude more eligible refugees from enrolling in the program. Private donors could contribute to resettlement agencies at a 2:1 match with additional financial and in-kind donations to allow the program to grow, despite limited government resources.

RCUSA (Unpublished Draft): *Increasing the role of the Private Sector Involvement in U.S. Refugee Resettlement*, 2015

#### **Further Research**

- Which MG program aspects are successful and which components leave room for growth?
- Which MG data points predict long-term integration? Subsequently, how might refugee agencies be able to utilize this knowledge to adjust existing program operations or develop new employment programs for refugees?

## #4: Local Advocacy Matters

### *Highlighting Positive Community Contributions*

#### **Thought**

It's often said that refugees are resilient, having escaped persecution, violence and wars. A new study underscores this notion with hard facts. Researchers of Chmura Economics & Analytics found that within two years of coming to the U.S., only 8 percent of refugee households are still receiving public assistance, a level of self-sufficiency that beats national norms. "Far from burdening a community, refugees tend to assimilate quickly, find work, buy houses and often start businesses," summarizes *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* in an in-depth review.

Chmura Economics & Analytics: *The Economic Impact of Refugees in the Cleveland Area*, 2013.

#### **Support**

Catholic Charities of Louisville published a Refugee Camp Simulation Guide, *Seeking Refuge: Forced to Flee*. Students participating in the refugee camp immersion project walk through a simulated camp, station to station to get an idea of what life in a refugee camp is like.

- The simulation is aimed to engaging students in refugee service work, raising awareness for the refugee cause and recruiting future donors and volunteers.
- This innovative project received the support of the MRS/USCCB Parishes Organized to Welcome Refugees Program (POWR).

#### **Recommendation**

1. Educational initiatives like the Refugee Camp Simulation Guide are tailored to changing the "hearts and minds" of refugee receiving communities.
2. These initiatives are easily replicable, achieving three goals: 1) Offering hands-on learning opportunities for students; 2) Generating significant cash and in-kind support for refugee services, and 3) Creating welcoming communities.

#### **Further Research**

1. How do refugees and refugee agencies contribute economically to America? Results from national research would allow refugee agencies to increase public interest in resettlement and bolster advocacy activities through success stories and numbers. Many immigrant advocacy groups have utilized similar impact studies to their advantage (for example, <http://www.maptheimpact.org>).
2. Having access to national data that show the community benefits of resettlement will strengthen refugee agencies' message of welcome and influence elected officials, who are wary about the perception that resettlement is a heavy taxpayer burden.

Chmura Economics & Analytics: *The Economic Impact of Refugees in the Cleveland Area*, 2013

Paul Hagstrom: *The Fiscal Impact of Refugee Resettlement in the Mohawk Valley*, 2000

Fiscal Review Committee of the Tennessee General Assembly: *A study on the Federal Cost Shifting to the State of Tennessee as a Result of the Refugee Resettlement Program for the period 1990 through 2012, 2013*

## #5: Increasing Program Funding Levels

### **Thought**

The U.S. resettlement system has been chronically underfunded, at least since 1991. When the U.S. refugee program was first established in 1980, refugee cash and medical assistance were available for up to 36 months. Since 1991, these forms of assistance have been limited to eight months. Some observers have pointed to the availability of 36 months of cash assistance as a contributing factor to the long-term economic success of Vietnamese refugees, who arrived in large numbers in the 1980s. Since about 2010 the number of severely injured refugees and PTSD has significantly increased. Yet, the current political emphasis on tightening social program spending runs counter to the need of offering adequate social and medical support for refugees with mental illnesses and war injuries.

Congressional Research Service: *U.S. Refugee Resettlement Assistance*, 2011

Jessica Darrow: *The politics and implementation of U.S. refugee resettlement policy: A street-level analysis*. The University of Chicago, 2015

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service: *The Real Cost of Welcome. A Financial Analysis of Local Refugee Reception*, 2008

### **Support**

A recent study underscores this point. Observing the integration process of 434 refugee families in Salt Lake City, researchers found that the availability of extended case management made a big difference. They observed substantial improvements in wellbeing and reductions in needs in relation to health, employment, finances, housing, education, and family/community circumstances were observed over the course of two years.

Stacey A. Shaw and Patrick Poulin: *Findings from an Extended Case Management U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program*, 2014

### **Recommendation**

1. Refugee agencies could seek funding for a new national project that establishes an extended case management pilot that would include vocational ESL programming, job readiness training and behavioral health counseling.
2. Existing services for refugees do not typically include specialized re-certification programs for refugees who arrive with valuable professional skills. Private funds could support the expansion of these important services, and allow highly skilled refugees to begin to contribute to their new communities faster than is currently possible.

### **Further Research**

- Research programs of creative behavioral health counseling as means to overcoming trauma and achieving self-sufficiency.

## 10. Further Reading

Randy Capps, Kathleen Newland, Susan Fratzke, Susanna Groves, Michael Fix, Margie McHugh, and Gregory Auclair: *The Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees: Successes and Challenges*. Migration Policy Institute Report, June 2015

Chmura Economics & Analytics: *The Economic Impact of Refugees in the Cleveland Area*, 2013

Congressional Research Service: *U.S. Refugee Resettlement Assistance*, 2011

Jessica Darrow: *The Politics and Implementation of U.S. Refugee Resettlement Policy: A Street-level Analysis*. The University of Chicago, 2015

Paul Hagstrom: *The Fiscal Impact of Refugee Resettlement in the Mohawk Valley*, 2000

Krista Lee/Fiscal Review Committee of the Tennessee General Assembly: *A study on the Federal Cost Shifting to the State of Tennessee as a Result of the Refugee Resettlement Program for the period 1990 through 2012*. 2013

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service: *The Real Cost of Welcome. A Financial Analysis of Local Refugee Reception*, 2008

Richard Mollica: *Healing Invisible Wounds*. 2006

OECD/European Union: *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2015. Settling In*, 2015

Eleanor Ott: *The Labour Market Integration of Resettled Refugees*. UNHCR, 2013

RCUSA (Draft Paper): *Increasing the role of the Private Sector Involvement in U.S. Refugee Resettlement*. 2015

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