

Religious Agencies and Refugee Resettlement

By James R. Edwards, Jr.

While illegal immigration usually raises the ire of the public and politicians, few look closely at refugee programs. Most Americans, including Christians, reject the pro-amnesty stance fashionable among religious elites from the U.S. Catholic Conference to the Southern Baptist Convention to the National Association of Evangelicals. Yet many faith-based organizations, including arms of major religious entities, engage in resettling refugees.

This *Memorandum* briefly reports on the financial stake certain religious agencies have in U.S. refugee resettlement. It shows that refugee resettlement has become dependent on U.S. taxpayers and is a disruption to American communities, with nongovernmental agencies profiting from it.

The United States admitted 56,424 refugees in FY 2011, down from the prior year's 73,311 admissions,¹ but still far higher than the rest of the world's developed nations combined.² And the main reason for last year's drop was the steep decline in admissions of Iraqi refugees after two such refugees were arrested for plotting to send weapons and money to al Qaeda in Iraq.³ That total does not include other categories of humanitarian admissions that offer the same financial benefits to the religious agencies as refugees, such as asylees and Cuban-Haitian entrants, each with more than 20,000 admissions.

It is to the United States' credit that our nation has, from her founding, provided a safe haven for the unjustly persecuted. However, even well-meaning efforts require accountability and should be balanced against other important, competing priorities. Without appropriate balance and oversight, helping refugees shifts from being a worthy humanitarian gesture in truly exceptional cases to an avenue for government largesse, enriching private bureaucracies while feeding public cynicism.

Background

Colloquially speaking, refugees are persons displaced by natural disasters, war, civil unrest, and similar causes of danger and persecution. Ideally, they can return to their homeland once conditions are restored. Traditionally, refugees being brought to America received *ad hoc* assistance from the State Department and from private charities spending their own money. Refugee decisions tracked U.S. foreign policy interests, with refugees being admitted mainly from the Middle East and communist countries.

In 1968, the United States effectively became party to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention. This adopted the broad U.N. definition of "refugee," expanded the rights afforded refugees, and prohibited refugees' return to their home country if they claimed fear of persecution. The 1980 Refugee Act further aligned U.S. refugee policy with U.N. policy and established a federal refugee resettlement program.⁴ The president now sets an annual refugee cap. However, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, whose office processes displaced persons and determines whether one meets the definition of "refugee," drives the process.

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Private entities, such as Church World Service, an agency started by 30 Protestant denominations in 1946, formerly bore the full costs of resettling refugees. Such agencies helped refugees secure sponsors, such as a local church. The sponsors assumed responsibility for providing a refugee's housing and other needs, finding him or her a job, and seeing that he or she became self-sufficient in the community.⁵

Table 1. Major Refugee Resettlement Voluntary Agencies

Agency	Type
Church World Service/Immigration and Refugee Program	Religious
Episcopal Migration Ministries	Religious
Ethiopian Community Development Council	Ethnic-Based
Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society	Religious
International Rescue Committee	Secular
Kurdish Human Rights Watch	Ethnic-Based
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services	Religious
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants	Secular
U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Relief Services	Religious
World Relief	Religious

Sources: U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, Church World Service.

Since 1980, the new Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) in the U.S. State Department has referred individuals' files to one of 10 "voluntary agencies", or "volags", which in turn assign cases to local affiliate agencies. The majority of volags are religiously affiliated (see Table 1). Volags receive a Reception and Placement Grant from the PRM for each refugee they are assigned. Volags also collaborate with "mutual assistance associations", which focus mainly on ensuring that their charges retain strong ethnic and homeland ties.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) works further with volags and local affiliates, enrolling refugees in a broad range of welfare programs for which refugees automatically qualify after 30 days. They are not subject to the seven-year federal bar on welfare participation for immigrants, and those who naturalize remain eligible for welfare dependency beyond their first seven years here.

In addition to federal assistance, a number of state and local welfare programs also underwrite refugee resettlement in their locales. The system is structured so that it is in refugee assistance organizations' self-interest to get a refugee to a receiving locality, enrolled in public welfare programs, and move along to the next refugee.

For the Love of Money ...

Similar to what happened to private charity when the government took over many of its functions (and became less effective and efficient as a result), a refugee assistance industry has built up around government-run refugee bureaucracies and funding streams.⁶ It resembles other conglomerations of associations, agencies, and professional pleaders focused full-time on protecting and expanding their share of the public till, from public housing advocates to lobbies surrounding each "human services" program.

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Program “stakeholders” that receive millions of taxpayer dollars usually continue to receive funding year after year, with little accountability. These groups’ mission becomes guarding the government golden goose rather than helping people achieve self-sufficiency or maximizing efficiency in usage of public money. This same phenomenon seems to have influenced the refugee resettlement industry, including its religious agencies.

The amount of funding up for grabs for refugee resettlement is significant. The Reception and Placement Grant was \$900 per refugee assigned to a volag from 1980 until 2010. In 2010, the RPG level doubled to \$1,800 per assigned refugee. A resettlement agency pockets \$700 of each per-refugee grant.⁷ ORR further funds volags and affiliates through separate grant programs. Table 2 (p. 4) shows the amount of federal funding allotted to several of the private refugee resettlement organizations.

The volags that “resettle” refugees also maintain significant lobbying offices and advocacy programs, where public policy and politics are the coins of the realm. Because money is fungible, the more dollars these groups collect from the government the more private monies can go toward other purposes like political advocacy and lobbying. These groups certainly have a First Amendment right to petition the government, but they have no right to force taxpayers who may disagree with those agencies’ agenda to pay for their advocacy.

Love Thy Neighbor?

One of the evils stemming from the apparent love of taxpayer money relates to the adverse effects resettlement agencies cause for the American cities where refugees are settled. A 2010 report from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee concluded that resettlement organizations essentially force refugees on U.S. towns and cities, without consent or even notice. Table 3 (p. 5) shows the U.S. metropolitan areas receiving the largest numbers of refugees. Table 4 (p. 5) ranks metro areas by the share of new immigration that is the result of refugee resettlement — i.e., those cities most affected by federal refugee policies.

This insensitive practice by volags and their associated agencies imposes a significant burden on unsuspecting host communities. As the Senate report said: “These newcomers place demands, sometimes significant, on local schools, police, hospitals, and social services. Local governments are often burdened with the weight of addressing the unique assistance refugees require, yet they rarely have an official role in influencing how many refugees are resettled by local voluntary agencies and often are not even informed in advance that new residents will be arriving.”⁸

As the resettlement groups persist in their revenue-producing refugee activities, their purported love of neighbor gets palmed off on others to see through and deal with for the long term. As the Senate Foreign Relations Committee report concluded: “While offering safe haven to persecuted populations throughout the world remains a humanitarian imperative, the administration should avoid biting off more than local communities are capable of chewing. Especially in a difficult economic climate, force-feeding refugees into a broken system is proving to be detrimental to the longer-term interests of refugees and to the cities that receive them.”⁹

More and more cities have had second thoughts as refugees have brought problems and caused costs to skyrocket. The problem has become so bad that some localities have sought a moratorium on taking in refugees. Ft. Wayne, Ind., one of the American cities overwhelmed by refugee resettlement and a case study in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee report, has lodged such a request for a halt on refugees. Manchester, N.H.,¹⁰ has made a similar request for the same kinds of reasons. Detroit has adopted a requirement that it will only take refugees with close family already there.¹¹ Other overwhelmed communities, thanks to forcible refugee residence, include Clarkston, Ga.,¹² Lynn, Mass.,¹³ and Omaha, Neb.¹⁴ The Tennessee legislature last year passed the Refugee Absorptive Capacity Act, the first-ever state law trying to give local communities some say in resettlement decisions.¹⁵

Table 2. Federal Funding of Voluntary Refugee Resettlement Agencies, FY1996-FY2011_(thousands)

NGO	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
CWS	317.5	269.5	560.2	419.6	554.6	3,250.0	2,960.0	3,228.0	6,352.0	3,592.0	3,592.0	2,829.0	7,336.0	5,130.0	5,289.0	5,146.0
DFMS	-	-	-	-	-	320.2	447.0	748.8	2,347.0	2,415.0	2,438.0	441.3	441.3	149.1	-	-
ECDC	281.9	438.6	1,052.0	1,054.0	1,516	2,369.0	2,204.0	3,347.0	2,873.0	2,040.0	2,215.0	2,399.0	3,269.0	3,097.0	3,146.0	2,877.0
HIAS	23,996.0	13,255.0	19,869.0	6,915.0	6,915.0	11,069.0	5,078.0	5,408.0	7,184.0	3,059.0	3,797.0	2,548.0	4,068.0	3,227.0	3,234.0	3,284.0
IRC	1,376.0	1,332.0	4,551.0	4,384.0	5,987.0	6,251.0	2,940.0	3,934.0	7,898.0	8,164.0	7,370.0	5,694.0	14,144.0	11,636.0	11,840.0	11,539.0
IRSA	2,567.0	2,567.0	1,184.0	262.5	12,134.0	12,710.0	12,710.0	12,447.0	9,398.0	9,398.0	8,894.0	-	-	-	-	-
KHRW	242.2	204.7	434.9	508.7	508.7	508.7	518.5	870.9	584.2	430.7	540.0	187.5	187.5	187.5	-	-
LIRS	1,981.0	2,140.0	6,162.0	5,252.0	5,119.0	6,800.0	3,170.0	961.1	1,264.0	963.7	609.9	834.3	8,127	8,779.0	8,538.0	8,314.0
USCC	136.0	249.2	437.0	437.0	696.9	373.1	373.1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	505.7
USCRI	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	562.5	611.3	611.3	940.2	706.4	707.7	637.7	1,024.0	615.0
WR	852.8	978.2	2,457.0	2,406.0	2,731.0	5,292.0	3,434.0	3,478.0	5,988.0	3,512.0	3,406.0	2,480.0	6,572.0	4,760.0	4,961.0	4,811.0

Source: Sources: Author compilation of Grants Administration FOIA data, Congressional Research Service.

Abbreviations: CWS=Church World Service; DFMS=Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society; ECDC=Ethiopian Community Development Council; HIAS=Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society; IRC=International Rescue Committee; IRSA=Immigration and Refugee Services of America; KHRW=Kurdish Human Rights Watch; LIRS=Lutheran Immigration Refugee Service; USCC=U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops; USCRI=U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants; WR=World Relief

Table 3. Top 20
Refugee-Receiving U.S.
Metropolitan Areas, 2000

Rank	Metropolitan Area
1	New York, N.Y.
2	Los Angeles, Calif.
3	Chicago, Ill.
4	Orange County, Calif.
5	Seattle, Wash.
6	San Jose, Calif.
7	Washington, D.C.
8	Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn.
9	Atlanta, Ga.
10	Sacramento, Calif.
11	Boston, Mass.
12	Portland, Ore.
13	San Diego, Calif.
14	Philadelphia, Pa.
15	Houston, Texas
16	Miami, Fla.
17	San Francisco, Calif.
18	Dallas, Texas
19	Oakland, Calif.
20	Phoenix, Ariz.

Source: Audrey Singer and Jill H. Wilson, "From 'There' to 'Here': Refugee Resettlement in Metropolitan America", Brookings Institution Living Cities Census Series, September 2006, http://www.brookings.edu/-/media/Files/rc/reports/2006/09demographics_singer/20060925_singer.pdf.

Table 4. Top 20 Cities in Refugees
as Share of New Immigrants,
1990-2000

Rank	Metropolitan Area
1	Utica-Rome, N.Y.
2	Fargo, ND-Moorhead, Minn.
3	Erie, Pa.
4	Sioux Falls, S.D.
5	Binghamton, N.Y.
6	Spokane, Wash.
7	Portland, Me.
8	Lincoln, Neb.
9	Waterloo-Cedar Falls, Iowa
10	Burlington, Vt.
11	Manchester, N.H.
12	Des Moines, Iowa
13	Louisville, Ky.
14	St. Louis, Mo.
15	Harrisburg-Lebanon-Carlisle, Pa.
16	Jacksonville, Fla.
17	Springfield, Mass.
18	Lansing-East Lansing, Mich.
19	Buffalo-Niagara Falls, N.Y.
20	Appleton-Oshkosh-Neenah, Wisc.

Source: Audrey Singer and Jill H. Wilson, "From 'There' to 'Here': Refugee Resettlement in Metropolitan America", Brookings Institution Living Cities Census Series, September 2006, http://www.brookings.edu/-/media/Files/rc/reports/2006/09demographics_singer/20060925_singer.pdf.

Conclusion

Refugee resettlement has become quite remunerative for the voluntary agencies that now receive government payment for this line of business. Some 11 private refugee bureaus received about \$37 million in government funding in FY 2011 alone.

The constant focus on amassing taxpayer money in large quantities seems to compete mightily as motivation for religious refugee agencies which, before taxpayers could be tapped, appeared truer to the biblical imperatives to love your neighbor as yourself and to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. When money becomes an idol, it skews focus and perspective. The temptation naturally becomes to put preservation of government funding sources ahead of maintaining pure motives and focusing on the charitable work.

Volags and their local partner organizations have a vested financial interest in raising the number of refugees admitted for resettlement in the United States. The more refugees taken by this country, the more cases assigned to each volag. The more refugee cases a volag is assigned, the more money the federal government hands over to the private agency. In some ways, the model resembles those charities that spend inordinately on fund raising and administration instead of on actually helping needy people.

Clearly, refugee resettlement policy and programs, from top to bottom, are overdue for congressional scrutiny and reform. Those organizations, including religious ones, receiving federal monies deserve close assessment. It is morally incumbent on religious refugee bureaus to examine their own hearts. As Christ said, it is impossible to serve both God and money (Luke 16:13). Their efforts would be a lot more honest and effective and a lot less harmful to their fellow countrymen and communities if they returned to reliance on private funding alone.

End Notes

¹ Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS), operated by the Refugee Processing Center (RPC) of the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, <http://www.wrapsnet.org/WRAPS/Reports/AdmissionsArrivals/tabid/211/Default.aspx>.

² The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports data by calendar year; in 2010, the most recent data available, the United States resettled 71,362 refugees, more than 72 percent of the total 98,761 refugees resettled worldwide that year. See *UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2010*, p. 152, <http://www.unhcr.org/4ef9cc9c9.html>.

³ Aamer Madhani, "Terror threat slows flow of Iraqi refugees here", *USA Today*, February 6, 2012, http://www.usatoday.com/NEWS/usaedition/2012-02-06-Iraqi-refugees_ST_U.htm.

⁴ As a result of the 1980 Refugee Act, a "refugee" is now defined in 8 USC 1101 as, in part, someone who has been persecuted or has a well-founded fear of persecution "on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion."

⁵ Jessica Eby, Jenifer Smyers, and Erol Kekic, "The Faith Community's Role in Refugee Resettlement and Advocacy in the United States", Church World Service Practice Paper, September 2010, http://www.churchworldservice.org/site/DocServer/Faith_Based_Humanitarianism_CWS_Conference_Paper_Septemb.pdf?docID=3921.

⁶ See Don Barnett, "Show Me the Money: How Government Funding Has Corrupted Refugee Resettlement," Center for Immigration Studies *Background*, April 1999, <http://www.cis.org/GovernmentFundingRefugeeResettlement>. Also, for fuller background on U.S. refugee policy and how it has expanded over time, see Don Barnett, "A New Era of Refugee Resettlement", Center for Immigration Studies *Background*, December 2006, <http://www.cis.org/RefugeeResettlement>.

⁷ Sen. Richard G. Lugar, "Abandoned upon Arrival: Implications for Refugees and Local Communities Burdened by a U.S. Refugee Resettlement System That Is Not Working", Report to the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, July 21, 2010, p. 3, <http://lugar.senate.gov/issues/foreign/refugee/report.pdf>.

⁸ Lugar, p. 2.

⁹ Lugar, p. 14.

¹⁰ Abby Goodnough, "After Taking in Refugees for Years, a New Hampshire City Asks for a Pause", *The New York Times*, November 25, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/26/us/manchester-new-hampshire-seeks-halt-in-refugee-resettlement.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all.

¹¹ Goodnough.

¹² Lugar, p. 11.

¹³ "City Council, Crime Round out Top 10 for Lynn in 2011", *Daily Item*, January 1, 2012, <http://www.itemlive.com/articles/2011/12/31/news/news03.txt>.

¹⁴ John Rudolf, "Sudanese Refugees in Omaha Wrestle with Rise of Street Gangs", *Huffington Post*, December 23, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/23/sudan-sudanese-refugees-omaha-nebraska_n_1165709.html.

¹⁵ <http://refugeeresettlementwatch.wordpress.com/2011/06/04/tennessee-takes-major-first-step-to-regain-some-local-control-of-refugee-resettlement-process/>.