Official line on refugee costs doesn't hold up

By Don Barnett

Reacting to public concern about the U.S. refugee program, and not wanting to lose another city for its resettlement program, the U.S. State Department mounted a charm offensive in Nashville recently.

The visit from Washington consisted of a press conference preceded by small group meetings involving David Robinson, the director of the State Department's refugee bureau; local program participants; a lobbyist; and state legislators.

Tennessee's law allowing localities to request a "time out" from the program if social services are shown to be overly burdened was deemed compatible with federal law. Why it was needed at all was the question raised during the visit. After all, according to Tennessee's state refugee coordinator, refugees "are financially self-sufficient within a few months and are not dependent on public welfare." Also, "Tennessee does not provide funding for refugee resettlement within its borders."

Actually, a federal study of refugees who arrived in a recent five-year period shows high welfare usage among refugees. Almost 45 percent of refugees in this group ages 16 and older are on Medicaid (TennCare in Tennessee — 35 percent funded by state taxes). According to a Metro Nashville Social Services report: "More services will be needed for the refugee and immigrant population. More translation services are needed now. Currently, there is more demand for rent, utilities, medical and transportation assistance."

During the visit, there was much talk of public/private initiatives and the work of State Department "partners" such as Catholic Charities. Tennessee's state refugee coordinator — in what must be the oddest arrangement in modern Tennessee state governance — is also a full-time employee of Catholic Charities, the main federal contractor responsible for resettling refugees in Tennessee.

If you are thinking charity, think again. According to Robinson, writing earlier about the refugee budget of Catholic Charities' parent organization: "The federal government provides about 90 percent of its collective budget," and its lobbying umbrella "wields enormous influence over the administration's refugee admissions policy. It lobbies the Hill effectively to increase the number of refugees admitted for permanent resettlement each year.... If there is a conflict of interest, it is never mentioned.... The solution its members offer to every refugee crisis is simplistic and the same: Increase the number of admissions to the United States without regard to budgets."

David M. Robinson

In fact, refugee resettlement is profitable for the nonprofits. Fifty-eight percent of Catholic Charities' budget goes to salaries, including $150,000 for its director.

A 2010 congressional report concludes that refugees "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."

The refugee program raises fundamental questions about states' rights, federal unfunded mandates, church-state relations and contractor accountability. But, as a practical matter, Eric Schwartz, a former refugee bureau director, once said that the U.S. should not support "partners" and "aid providers that see themselves as contractors."

Neither should Tennessee. ■

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