

Refugee Resettlement

A System Badly in Need of Review

BY DON BARNETT

One has to be careful when trying to explain the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). Too much truth and in too much detail leaves those unfamiliar with the program looking at you like you are crazy. Among those unfamiliar with the topic—and therefore unable to completely process and act on information about it—are most of the political elite, especially Congress.

A wide-ranging review is needed of this costly and out-of-control system. It has failed refugees, both by diverting limited resources from overseas assistance and by the sheer neglect of those resettled in the United States by their “sponsors.” The program is rife with fraud, profitable for hundreds of “non-profit” organizations, and is a potential channel for terrorism into American communities.

Summary

Loss of U.S. Control. Policy about who is admitted as a refugee to the United States has been surrendered to the U.N. and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that stand to benefit from the program. In recent years, up to 95 percent of the refugees coming to the United States were referred by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or were putative relatives of U.N.-selected refugees.

Given the impact that refugee resettlement has on all other forms of immigration—both legal and illegal—the U.N. can be thought of as setting U.S. immigration policy for future generations of Americans.

Security Matters. Meaningful background checks are difficult to obtain for refugees admitted from countries without reliable government records. Common criminals, war criminals, international fugitives, and

terrorists have all used the USRAP and its related asylum provisions for entry into the United States. Bribery of U.N. officials is commonly reported among those attempting to secure refugee admission to the United States.

Uncontrolled Growth. After a brief post 9-11 slowdown, the program is now, once again, admitting more refugees than envisioned in the 1980 Refugee Act. At 80,000 refugee admissions planned for 2011, the United States will admit nearly three times the number of refugees as the rest of the developed world combined.

U.S. Taxpayers Without Borders. The U.S. welfare system is a global magnet, which has been instrumentalized by the international refugee industry. The use of welfare, subsidized housing, Medicaid, and other programs is staggering. Including the cost of ongoing welfare—which is permanent for many refugees—easily raises the cost of the domestic resettlement program to 10 times the official estimates of \$1.1 billion annually.

Exploitation for Profit. Refugee resettlement is very profitable for some non-profits. Religious organizations and NGOs involved in the program consistently refuse to commit any of their own resources for the resettlement effort. Instead, these organizations have turned to the refugee program to generate an income stream, abandoning traditional charitable works that do not pay. Most of the second- and third-tier refugee organizations receiving contracts and grants today are run by former refugees themselves, which has put the program on a perpetual growth trajectory.

American Community Impact. Some American towns have been overwhelmed by the arrival of refugees. At no point are these communities consulted. The closed loop of the U.N., the State Department, and NGOs leaves citizens with no voice in events that affect their communities.

Non-Assimilation. The USRAP is increasingly bringing in groups that have stated openly they do not intend to assimilate into American culture. Even those groups with good intentions are coming from cultures so diverse that often little progress is made in assimilation after many years.

Chain Immigration. Official refugee admis-

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sion numbers do not present the full picture. The initial admission leads to exploitation of the chain immigration system. Recent DNA testing revealed false claims of “family connections” as high as 90 percent in some groups. Refugee groups that were originally small and supposedly self-contained have set off significant inflows of legal and illegal immigration.

Abandonment upon Arrival. Despite PR about supporting refugees, NGOs routinely abandon their charges after four months or less, moving on to the next, more profitable, cycle of recent admissions. NGOs expect the welfare system to take care of refugees.

Globalized Disease. Refugees and those arriving on various “following-to-join” programs are bringing in HIV, hepatitis, TB, malaria, and other diseases. Refugees are no longer tested for many diseases such as HIV before admission.

The Current System

In arguing for a grant of asylum, *The New York Times* opined in 2004:

In an enlightened world, no society would force women to wear burkas against their will, or threaten them with death for daring to talk to a man. Mr. Ashcroft and the Department of Homeland Security should make certain that such persecuted women who flee to the United States have a chance to stay.¹

The president’s “Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2011,” a report to Congress that surveys the status of human rights around the globe while assigning a quota of U.S.-bound refugees to each geographic region, is troubled by conditions in Muslim Central Asia because, “In some countries, there are legal prohibitions against wearing the hijab in certain public contexts, such as universities. In others, wearing the hijab or wearing beards marks one as an observant Muslim and leads to frequent requests for identification documents by the authorities. Muslims in some cities are subject to harassment and societal violence.”²

It is no exaggeration to say that for many in the human rights establishment you have an automatic invitation to any country as a bona fide asylum seeker if you are forbidden to cover up or if you are required to cover up — take your pick.

Of course, migration in search of more personal freedom is as old as human society itself. This is not about mere migration. This is about a refugee and asylum program set up originally for extreme and exceptional cases — historically, where life itself was threatened by the state. This is a program that brings extraordinary privileges and entitlements, such as immediate access to all social services and welfare on the same basis as a U.S. citizen and the right to bring over rela-

tives with those same entitlements ahead of other immigrants.

Refugees are persons who have fled their home countries due to a “well-founded” fear of persecution on account of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership “in a particular social group.”

As originated in international and U.S. law, refugee status (or its close relative asylum status, which is for those who get to the United States on their own and then ask for asylum, rather than those selected abroad and brought here), was never intended for those fleeing “generalized violence,” war, civil war, crime, domestic violence, coercive population control measures, the pressure of societal norms, or the breakdown of societal norms.

Today all of these are legitimate grounds for a claim of asylum or refuge. Granted, during the Cold War, the program also failed the test of a true refugee program on many counts, but at least Cold War concerns and national interest limited the potential for endless expansion of the program.

No such controls exist today. Least of all do program costs count for anything, covered as they are by the welfare state and with “sponsors” abandoning the true sacrifice of charity for profitable federal contracts.

Expansion of the definition of a refugee, allowing the UN to dictate up to 95 percent of refugees accepted by the United States and the complete retreat from responsibility — financial or otherwise — by refugee “sponsors,” has had predictable effects on the evolution of the program.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, describing the UK’s asylum program in his autobiography, *A Journey: My Political Life*, offered a synopsis that applies to a large part of our current refugee/asylum program:

The presumption was that someone who claimed asylum was persecuted and should be taken in, not cast out....

Unfortunately it was completely unrealistic in the late twentieth century. The presumption was plainly false; most asylum claims were not genuine. Disproving them, however, was almost impossible. The combination of the courts, with their liberal instinct; the European Convention on Human Rights, with its absolutist attitude to the prospect of returning someone to an unsafe community; and the U.N. Convention of Refugees, with its context firmly that of 1930s Germany, meant that, in practice, once someone got into Britain and claimed asylum, it was the Devil’s own job to return them.

And, of course, many thought it was indeed

the work of the Devil to try. The first attempt at tightening the law in 1998 produced a hysterical reaction.³

Like most recent years, this year will see another increase in the U.S. program as up to 80,000 are admitted as refugees. The recession and lack of jobs is no barrier to program growth. This year the United States resettled about three times as many refugees as all the rest of the countries in the industrialized world combined. In addition, we allowed about 45,000 “Cuban-Haitian entrants” and asylum seekers to settle—all with the same privileges, rights, and entitlements as refugees. The biggest impact of the program is the “following-to-join” stream that arrives both legally and illegally from parts of the globe that were never traditional sources of immigration to the United States.

An opaque stream of money cascades through a multi-tiered system of support set up to administer refugee assistance programs.

The 10 main contractors, sometimes called Volags for “Voluntary Agencies,” operate through about 350 affiliate organizations in 49 states — only Wyoming has been left out of refugee resettlement. Despite the particularly primitive conditions many refugees come from and the overwhelming and new cultural landscape they encounter upon arrival, the contractors’ responsibility for the large majority of refugees ends after four months.

A recent report issued by Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) details some of this impact. The aptly named report, “Abandoned Upon Arrival: Implications for Refugees and Local Communities Burdened by a Resettlement System That Is Not Working,” accompanies a request for a GAO study of resettlement.⁴

For the most part, the contractors and their affiliates leave the burden of care to federal, state, and local social services. Augmenting these public social services and in addition to the 350 contractor affiliates, an unaudited NGO nation has grown up to administer federal refugee grants and contracts over and beyond what the main contractors and their affiliates handle.

These “service providers” as well as many of the contractor affiliates are now run by former refugees themselves. In fact these second- and third-tier service providers are more accurately described as exclusive ethnic clubs with close ties to the home country. A recent government-sponsored study finds “U.S. resettlement communities are awash with government supported Ethnic Community Based Organizations (ECBOs) that exist in name only but provide little meaningful assistance.”⁵ But they do provide paying jobs and a significant constituency in support of refugee resettlement, sometimes conflated with America’s traditional welcoming nature.

Neither the local welfare office nor the ECBOs are equipped to promote assimilation. In any event, the watchword in the refugee business today is “adaptation” rather than assimilation. As used here, the operative term

lives up to its connotations of maintaining one’s core identity while changing just enough to get by—decidedly less than assimilation.

Islam has presented the biggest challenge to whatever is left of the assimilation ideal. The Islamic component of the refugee stream, near zero in 1990, had reached about 45 percent by September 2001. For fiscal year (FY) 2010, about 27 percent of arriving refugees self-identified as Muslim.⁶

One of the biggest unreported stories of the decade is the desire of some, if not many, Muslim refugees to get away from Islam. I was recently verbally accosted in a Middle Eastern grocery store by a refugee who was extremely upset at having been in the country for years with nary an invitation to an American home or church. I regularly hear similar stories from refugees and volunteers who work with refugees. According to a staffer at a service provider, Muslim refugee women who are trying to go without wearing a hijab — this is a free country after all — feel they must don the covering when going to the local 100-percent-taxpayer-supported NGO/ECBO office for Healthy Marriage and Family Enrichment counseling.

The increasingly conservative tone from the local mosque is often explained as a self-revealing boldness that is coming from increased numbers on the ground. That is no doubt true. But, by some accounts, it is low mosque attendance rates in the new communities that have led to more threatening and shrill tones from the religious leadership. America, in the meantime, acts like it has nothing better to offer in the way of an alternative to the threats from the local imam.

How ironic that at a time when it is needed most and when its value and appeal is still apparent to many new arrivals, the assimilation model has been completely abandoned in favor of an enforced multiculturalism.

This missed opportunity may be the biggest tragedy of the irresponsibility of the contractors such as Catholic Charities—neither Catholic nor a charity—and its parent, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the leading resettlement contractor.

Though most Muslim refugees and immigrants want nothing to do with radical Islamism or jihad, it would be naïve to deny that Islamic radicalism has taken root in some refugee communities. Domestic recruitment of would-be jihadists is taking place here in the United States, and radical Islamists are likely arriving on the direct path of the refugee program, if not along the well-worn path of ethnic networks and clans of refugees already settled.

Common criminals, war criminals, international fugitives, and terrorists have all used the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program and its related asylum provisions for entry into the United States.

Refugee youths returning to Somalia to wage jihad

and the recent indictment of Mohamud Adbi Yusuf, a refugee from Somalia who allegedly conspired with other Somalis to transmit money to Al-Shabaab are becoming common news stories.⁷

Recently, the Department of Homeland Security alerted border states to be on the lookout for an Al Shabaab operative who might be attempting to enter the United States via Mexico. The warning follows an indictment in Texas federal court that accuses a Somali man, Ahmed Muhammed Dhakane, of running a “large-scale smuggling enterprise” in Texas responsible for bringing hundreds of Somalis from Brazil through South America and eventually across the U.S.-Mexican border. According to court documents reported by Patrick Poole and the Investigative Project on Terrorism, some of the people Dhakane smuggled in were members of the U.S.-designated terrorist organization Al-Ittihad Al-Islami. Dhakane, to be sentenced in late April, bragged that he made as much as \$75,000 in one day smuggling Somalis, and, according to the prosecutor’s sentencing memo, Dhakane (who had sought asylum in the United States) believed some of those smuggled in “would fight against the United States if the jihad moved from overseas locations to the U.S. mainland.”⁸

As long ago as 2006 a U.N. News Service report found that Somalis are using United Nations refugee camps in Zambia as “stepping stones” to the United States. According to the story, the Somalis first settle in Zambian refugee camps and then slip into neighboring Zimbabwe and Namibia. From there, they “filter into South Africa before negotiating their way onto Mexico-bound ships. Once in Mexico, they can easily walk into the USA as their final destination,” according to Zambian Secretary of interior Peter Mumba.⁹

Once in the United States, for those who belong to categories we are taking as refugees there is a better than 50 percent chance of getting asylum, with very little chance of being detained or sent home even if denied asylum — not any easy trip, but worth the risk for those in desperate straits.¹⁰

Of course, smuggling operations are not caused by the refugee program, but it is safe to say they couldn’t have started without the communities that were established in America as a result of the refugee program.

Prior to acceptance as a refugee in the U.S. program, refugees aged 14 to 79 are required to have their fingerprints and names crosschecked on various U.S. government databases of known terrorists and those previously rejected for immigration status. According to a U.S. State Department official, “several” databases are used at various agencies including the FBI. The databases are unnamed to preserve the integrity and security of the background check process. Just for starters, the lack of secure official records from most refugee-send-

ing countries would mean we can’t be sure even about given names and ages.

Needless to say, risk assessment of some of these individuals is nearly impossible, especially if they aren’t already registered somewhere as suspect. If, as was shown recently¹¹ at the highest levels of intelligence circles on the ground for a decade in Afghanistan, we lack the means to obtain the approximate identity of a self-identified “Taliban negotiator” after several months of talks, how can we claim to have the remotest idea of who is coming over from uncontrolled U.N. refugee camps in a region where our presence is limited and where there are many forces at war in their own lethal way with the United States?

For some reason, the rejection rate based on failing the “background check” is classified information. We have no idea how many are screened out by this process from such countries as Somalia, Iran, or Iraq — all among the top five sending countries in recent years.¹²

One of the demands of the refugee lobby is to give Legal Permanent Residency to refugees upon arrival. Currently, refugees and successful asylees are given a work authorization and entitlements to all welfare, but must wait a year before getting Legal Permanent Residency.

It is much easier to deport an individual without Legal Permanent Residency.

Since we don’t really know who we are admitting, this short time period of a year is useful in case a discovery is made of past or current criminal/terrorist activity.

The Refugee Protection Act of 2010 (S.3113), sponsored by Patrick Leahy, would have removed this year-long waiting period by granting Legal Permanent Residency to refugees immediately upon arrival. The bill was re-introduced on March 21, 2013, with three co-sponsors: Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Mazie Hirono (D-HI), and Carl Levin (D-MI).

Until the late 1990s the United States picked the large majority of refugees for resettlement in the United States. In recent years up to 95 percent of the refugees coming to the United States were referred by the UNHCR or were the relatives of U.N.-picked refugees.

With the enormous role granted the U.N. in our refugee program, corruption in the UNHCR must be a matter of the highest concern. A torrent of corruption is pouring in with the program.

A 2005 Resettlement Study commissioned by the U.S. State Department finds:

In today’s conditions, the fraud problem has probably worsened, owing to modern communications and the growth of organized crime or other enterprises trying to make money from facilitating a person’s inclusion in a resettlement program.... The tempta-

tions in this field have...sometimes resulted in damaging corruption...on the part of certain U.N. officials or others in a responsible role, who find they can extract large bribes or other personal favors for moving certain cases to the head of the resettlement line.¹³

There are many ways for an individual to move ahead on the list of those desiring to come to the United States on this program. One way is to move to a refugee camp and declare one's self a member of a needy category. Per the same report:

Traditional categories for resettlement referrals, especially the category for 'women at risk,' can become self-fulfilling. When it becomes known that resettlement is possible on this ground, families may separate to enable the woman to win a referral for herself and the children and perhaps be able to bring the husband later.

And once a group is targeted for inclusion in the program its numbers start growing. Groups who think they might be selected refuse other options, like going home, knowing that if they sit it out long enough they will get a free pass to the United States. Again, from the State Department report:

This magnet effect or pull factor forms an increasingly pervasive worry for host countries and sometimes for the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in thinking about resettlement initiatives. Those parties also worry that providing a resettlement option [i.e. to the West] will interfere with pursuit of other durable solutions—local integration or voluntary repatriation.

Another means to achieve the highly prized refugee status is to claim family relationship with a refugee already in the United States, a privileged category that is essentially for sale on an international black market in many cases. It is only necessary for an "anchor" in the United States to sign a document attesting to this relationship for the "relative" overseas to move up on the waiting list.

A 2008 State Department audit of these "Affidavits of Relationship" found up to 90 percent to be fraudulent in the Somali refugee community. Family reunification as a privileged category was temporarily halted in most cases for refugees.¹⁴

Of course the issue of refugee family relationships can't help but raise questions about family chain migration in general, which happens to be the main engine for the million or so green cards the United States gives out each year.

The government has repeatedly postponed a resumption of the refugee family reunification program with DNA testing to prove relationships of claimed family members in some cases. As planned, the DNA program will not cover initial family units and this, along with the polygamous family structure found in many U.S. refugee groups today, will seriously hinder efforts to stop this kind of fraud.

Conclusion

Traditionally, America's welcome for refugees was based on private sponsor charity and responsibility. The transformation of refugee resettlement from the work of charities to that of profit-making federal contractors has given birth to a global refugee industry and set off wildly escalating expectations among refugees and would-be immigrants around the globe.

It easily has a price tag 10 times the official estimate of \$1.1 billion annually, mainly because of welfare costs, which are left out of all official estimates of program cost.¹⁵

When the contractors cite the time it takes for a refugee to achieve "self-sufficiency" they neglect to mention that under their (and the government's) definition, an individual refugee can be considered "self-sufficient" and still be in most public assistance programs such as public housing, Medicaid, Food Stamps, WIC, etc. In some cases, even dependence on cash assistance does not prevent one from being "self-sufficient."¹⁶

A federal government survey found that refugees who arrived in the past five years — there are no government studies of refugees with longer residency — are three to five times more likely than the average native-born American to be receiving the lifetime cash welfare program SSI along with Medicaid.¹⁷ They are also four to five times more likely to be in public housing and receiving Food Stamps than the average American. In addition federal grants for "Violence against Women," "Marriage Support," "Ownership Society," "Abstinence Education," and other programs are used disproportionately by refugee organizations.

In the face of complaints from states about unfunded mandates and an outcry over poor resettlement outcomes, with refugees left to fend for themselves in shoddy and dangerous public housing ghettos, the White House Domestic Policy Council and National Security Council initiated a study of the program last year. The study is still going on.

Their recommendations will likely only shovel more federal money at the program in an attempt to mollify the states.

The authors of the study have explicitly stated that a review of the contractors is off limits, cutting off an obvious path of inquiry before the review even began.¹⁸

Yet the total lack of meaningful, long-term engagement by the contractors, i.e., the so-called “sponsors,” with refugees is one of the biggest failings of this program. Any review that fails to take this into account is not a review.

A genuine assessment of the entire refugee resettlement program is long overdue. For that to happen we must first raise the leaden curtain of myth and misunderstanding that hides this program.

Eleven Key Recommendations

First, Congress must mandate a fixed ceiling for annual admissions. Currently Congress defers to the administration for determination of the annual refugee quota, a number that has gone up sharply since 9-11. Today the administration can set whatever number it wants for refugee admissions each year. An annual ceiling of 20,000 would still make the United States the leading resettlement country in the developed world.

Second, Consider an agreement with UNHCR whereby UNHCR refugees or asylum seekers to the United States who commit certain crimes may be returned to UNHCR camps. The United States is the most important funder of the UNHCR and the International Organization of Migration (IOM), the main international organizations dealing with refugees. In recent years, the United States has provided 23-25 percent of the UNHCR’s \$3.3 billion budget and about 31 percent of IOM’s \$1.3 billion budget.

Third, Congress must clarify (again) that resettlement to the United States is a last option for individuals in extreme danger only after the failure of all efforts to return home or settle in the region where the refugee currently resides. U.S. resources should be directed toward helping refugees integrate in place or return to their country of origin.

Fourth, Implement a National Governors Association recommendation calling for consultation with state and local communities before refugees are resettled in a community. Local and state entities should have the right to refuse resettlement.

Fifth, Review all “special categories” that confer advantages on certain groups applying for asylum and refugee status, such as Lautenberg Amendment refugees, asylum-seekers who claim to be fleeing China’s “one-child” policy, Cuban Adjustment Act beneficiaries, etc. Repeal those categories not in the spirit of the original Refugee Act of 1980.

Sixth, Refugee NGOs and their umbrella and spin-off organizations should be barred from lobbying Congress on refugee policy. They should have no role in selecting individuals for inclusion on the refugee program.

Seventh, Currently the rate of background checks

provided for refugees from certain countries and the denial rate based on those background checks is classified information. This data should be made public.

Eighth, Restore the public/private partnership. Extremely “gray accounting,” if not outright fraud, is rampant in all aspects of the program. The NGO “match” must be increased. Implement a four-month waiting period before allowing eligibility for welfare programs. This would guarantee that NGOs shoulder some financial responsibility—still a small fraction of the taxpayer’s cost—and actually improve prospects for assimilation.

Discourage “secondary migration,” which occurs when refugees move to a different location immediately after being resettled. This causes unplanned and unfunded demands on social services at the “secondary migration” destination and can be largely prevented by allowing access to social services only in the original state for some period of time after arrival.

Include the cost of ongoing social services and medical care in all official estimates of program costs. These costs—by far the largest component of the program—are left out of all cost estimates today.

Do not eliminate the one-year waiting period before refugees can apply for legal permanent residency, as called for by the Refugee Protection Act, introduced by Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) in 2010. This bill will likely be considered again in 2011. ■

Endnotes

1. “A Haven for Abused Women,” *The New York Times*, April 29, 2004.
2. Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2011, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/148671.pdf>, p. 37.
3. Tony Blair, *A Journey: My Political Life*, New York: Knopf, 2010, pp. 204-205.
4. “Abandoned upon Arrival: Implications for Refugees and Local Communities Burdened by a Resettlement System That Is Not Working,” August 26, 2010, Sen. Lugar Letter to Secretaries Clinton and Sebelius and National Security Advisor Jones, <http://lugar.senate.gov/issues/foreign/refugee/>.
5. “Practitioner Lessons from Ethnic Community Self-Help Programs,” ISED Solutions, August 2009.
6. “Report on refugee arrivals by religion through November 16, 2010,” U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, [http://cis.org/sites/cis.org/files/Arrivals by Religion.pdf](http://cis.org/sites/cis.org/files/Arrivals%20by%20Religion.pdf).
7. <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2010/05/26/terror-alert-mexican-border/>; see also “Prosecutors: Somali

Smuggled Jihadists into U.S.” IPT News, March 25, 2001, <http://www.investigativeproject.org/2716/Prosecutors-Somali-Smuggled-Jih...>

8. <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2010/05/26/terror-alert-mexican-border/>.

9. “ZAMBIA: Concern over Somalis leaving refugee camp,” IRIN NEWS, June 5, 2006, <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=59224>.

10. “U.S. immigration judges are approving nearly half of all requests for asylum, a dramatic turnaround from the mid-1980s, when only about 10 percent were granted, according to a new analysis of Justice Department records. Denial rates are at their lowest in 25 years.” From “Report: Immigration judges approving more asylum bids,” *USA Today*, September 2, 2010. For those coming from current refugee-sending areas the acceptance rate is higher.

11. “Taliban Leader in Secret Talks Was an Impostor,” *The New York Times*, November 22, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/23/world/asia/23kabul.html>.

12. Various interviews with staff from United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the State Department (individuals not cited per request). Secrecy around exactly how background checks are conducted, which databases are used, etc. may well be necessary to preserve integrity of the process. Knowing the rate of rejection based on background checks would not seem to be a security issue.

13. David Martin, “The United States Refugee Admissions Program: Reforms for a New Era of Refugee Resettlement,” U.S. Department of State, 2004, executive summary is at http://www.migrationpolicy.org/MPI_Mar_ExecSum3.pdf.

14. “Refugee Program Halted as DNA Tests Show Fraud,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 20, 2008.

15. “Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2011,” p. 63, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/148671.pdf>.

16. “Report to Congress FY 2007,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/data/ORR_2007_report.pdf; and Peggy Halpern, “Refugee Economic Self-Sufficiency: An Exploratory Study of Approaches Used in Office of Refugee Resettlement Programs,” November 2008, <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/RefugeeSelfSuff/>.

Economic self-sufficiency is one of the most important measurements used in assessing refugee resettlement

efforts. Economic self-sufficiency for the Office of Refugee Resettlement is defined in federal regulations as “earning a total family income at a level that enables a family unit to support itself without receipt of a cash assistance grant (CFR 45 400.2).” Most Volags reported in 2007 that 65 percent or better of their refugee families were “self-sufficient” after just four months. But there is no bar to the use of welfare programs in order to achieve “self-sufficiency,” which seems odd since it is used as a measure of successful integration. According to an officer at a Volag who asked to remain anonymous, even cash assistance does not prevent one from being “self-sufficient.” From an e-mail correspondence: “We complete a report at 90 days from arrival for them and self sufficiency can include any source of income including SSI or family assistance [TANF] or any other type of assistance as long as income exceeds expenses.”

17. Any attempt to determine welfare usage rates for refugees, especially for purposes of comparison with other groups, will be imperfect at best. There are no serious federal studies in this area. The single study of refugee welfare usage is a voluntary phone survey of those refugees in the country five years or less. The latest survey available is for 2007; 63 percent of those contacted for the survey did not respond. More than half of those who *did* respond in earlier years — and thus were contacted for subsequent follow-up questions — “could not be traced in time to be interviewed.” Adding to the difficulty of comparisons with other groups: The refugee phone survey measures usage by household only. Comparisons with groups measured on an individual basis is inexact.

The phone survey likely understates welfare dependency since it is voluntary and those most likely to be dependent are more likely not to answer, fearing the stigma or that they are being tracked because of usage. On the other hand, since the group surveyed contains many recent arrivals, the study would be skewed toward overstatement of usage by those for whom assistance is only temporary. The measure of usage rates by households could appear higher when compared to usage rates on a per capita basis for some programs. But since SSI tends to be a lifetime entitlement, it is nevertheless worth trying to make sense of usage rates.

For some reason, the mainstream media and even the Congressional Research Service continue to say things like “Refugees are eligible for TANF for five years and SSI for seven years. Refugees who meet the

eligibility requirements for Medicaid may enroll in that program and receive Medicaid services for seven years.” (Andorra Bruno, “U.S. Refugee Resettlement Assistance,” CRS report R41570, January 4, 2011, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41570.pdf>). Actually, as almost every intending refugee knows — even those in the most far-flung refugee camps — both Medicaid and SSI are lifetime entitlements for refugees starting 30 days after arrival. It is only necessary to become a citizen to make it so.

According to a 1999 GAO report, “Welfare Reform: Public Assistance Benefits to Recently Naturalized Citizens,” GAO HEHS-99-102, p. 2, 2.4 percent of native-born individuals receive cash assistance from SSI vs. 8.3 percent of recently naturalized immigrants (both refugees and non-refugees, but mostly non-refugee immigrants).

For the latest available refugee welfare usage data, see ORR’s “Report to Congress FY 2007,” p. 91, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/data/ORR_2007_report.pdf). This report shows 51 percent of refugee households in the group arrived five years ago or less to have one or more members receiving Medicaid, 50 percent on food stamps, and 25 percent in public housing (plus more on waiting lists). SSI usage for the group is 15.3 percent — easily 3- to 5-times the rate of native-born usage and likely higher.

18. “The National Security Staff has not attempted to coordinate a review of voluntary agency process and practices.” From a letter to Sen. Richard Lugar, January 12, 2011, from Thomas E. Donilon, National Security Advisor, <http://cis.org/sites/cis.org/files/ResponsetoRGLQsonRefugeeResettlementf...>