

Tennessee Needs to Regain Role As Refugee Coordinator

By **DON BARNETT**

At what level of taxpayer support for an entity do we stop calling that entity a “non-government organization” or a “religious nonprofit”?

Revenue in 2011 for Migration and Refugee Services, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (USCCB) refugee contracting arm, was more than \$72 million, about 98 percent of which came from the taxpayer in the form of government grants or federal contracts. Would it surprise anyone to find it subject to the same incentives and laws of behavior that have driven federal contractors since the birth of the republic?

USCCB’s main source of contracts and grants comes from refugee resettlement. The U.S. resettles nearly three times the refugees as the rest of the industrialized world combined, and the USCCB wants that number increased.

According to a recent report from the Washington think tank Migration Policy Institute (MPI), publicly funded private resettlement agencies, USCBB being the largest of nine, “meet with state and local agencies on a quarterly basis regarding the opportunities and services available to refugees in local communities and the ability of these communities to accommodate new arrivals. They also consult with the state refugee coordinator on placement plans for each local site. ... If a state opposes the plan, the State Department will not approve it.”

A July 2012 GAO report was a little more real world than the MPI report stating that “Most resettlement agencies ... consult with some public entities such as state refugee coordinators; however, most public entities such as public schools and health departments generally said that agencies notified them of the number of refugees expected to arrive in the coming year, but did not consult them regarding the number of refugees they could serve....”

Don Barnett is a contributor to The Social Contract. The article, which appeared in The Tennessean, August 7, 2013, is reprinted with permission from the author.

Both reports assume a state government role in the resettlement process. The state refugee coordinator evaluates the plans of the private contractors, representing the interests of the taxpayer in the process. That’s the way it is supposed to work, in theory.

In Tennessee, however, the state refugee coordinator is an employee of Catholic Charities, an affiliate of USCCB. Resettlement of the UN-selected refugees is Tennessee Catholic Charities’ largest mission and largest revenue item by far.

In 2008, Gov. Phil Bredesen thought he was streamlining the process and saving money by outsourcing the state coordinator function to the contractor. Instead, he gave up the opportunity for the state to have any input in a process that affects the state and set up a textbook illustration of a conflict of interest.

The annual cost of the program to Tennesseans went up immediately after the state handed over the position of state refugee coordinator. Today, Metro Nashville alone resettles more refugees than each of 29 states in the U.S.

A bill introduced in the 2013 Tennessee legislature had the modest goal of requiring Catholic Charities to keep an accounting of the numbers of refugees it places into programs that carry a cost to the state taxpayer. TennCare, for instance, is about 30 percent funded by the state and most refugees are placed in TennCare upon arrival.

Opposition to the bill was led by none other than the state refugee coordinator, whose motto seems to be “the less the public knows about this, the better.” The bill was deferred for “summer study” where bills often die. In this case, however, it may well come up again.

Hopefully, the 2014 legislature will act to require the contractor to record at least a portion of the costs it is running up on the taxpayers’ tab. A reasonable next step is for Tennessee to reclaim the function of the state refugee coordinator. This office should be representing the taxpayer, not the interests of a private contractor. ■