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## CHAPTER FOUR

# Refugee Resettlement in the United States

## *The Central Role of Voluntarism in a Time of Backlash*

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### Introduction

In 1979, A. Whitney Ellsworth and Hurst Hannum of the U.S. chapter of Amnesty International submitted written testimony to Congress related to hearings on the Refugee Act of 1980 (U.S. Committee on the Judiciary 1979). They called attention to their hope that the proposed legislation would increase the “normal flow” of refugees to 50,000 annually and admit them as immigrants rather than parolees with limited rights and access to services once settled in the United States. In their comments, Ellsworth and Hannum expressed hope that “American policy will become more consistent with the non-political, humanitarian concerns that underlie its international obligations as set forth in the Convention [on Refugees] and Optional Protocol” (U.S. Committee on the Judiciary 1979, 168). Congressional hearings revealed a deep desire among advocates to support those forcibly displaced in Southeast Asia due to the U.S. war in Vietnam and neighboring countries; in Cuba and Central America; and in Eastern Europe in the wake of Soviet expansion into Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. They pressed Congress and the White House to “regularize” the process for setting annual admissions goals, to grant immigrant visa status to those resettled through

the program, and to expand federal funding to support states and voluntary agencies (nonprofit organizations recognized by the government) to carry out the work of fostering the integration of refugees into local communities.

The Refugee Act of 1980 was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Jimmy Carter. The legislation aimed to “revise the procedures for the admission of refugees” and “to establish a more uniform basis for the provision of assistance to refugees” (U.S. Refugee Act 1980). Carter emphasized that the new policy was intended to “permit fair and equitable treatment of refugees in the United States, regardless of their country of origin.” Importantly, Carter noted that a goal of the new law was cooperation between the State Department and Congress in setting refugee admissions targets: “It allows us to change annual admissions levels in response to conditions overseas, policy considerations, and resources available for resettlement” (Carter 1980). The president also stressed the value of having refugees become “self-sufficient and contributing members of society,” even as he emphasized the role of the federal government in fostering the integration of refugees within U.S. society. “Until now, resettlement has been done primarily by private persons and organizations. They have done an admirable job,” Carter noted, “but the large numbers of refugees arriving now create new strains and problems. Clearly, the Federal Government must play an expanded role in refugee programs” (Carter 1980).

The 1980 Refugee Act was one of the first U.S. laws passed in alignment with international humanitarian legal standards, adopting the definition for “refugee” used by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as a core principle to determine eligibility for resettlement to the United States (Haines 2010). The Refugee Act amended the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act to define refugee as any individual who is “outside any country of such person’s nationality” or “outside any country in which such person last habitually resided,” and “is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country” due to “persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (1980 Refugee Act, Sec. 201).

Yet, while the Refugee Act expanded admissions and strengthened social supports for refugees once resettled, it has also reflected political interests of particular U.S. presidential administrations. Carter believed that determining admissions targets and policies related to which refugees gain admission to the United States (from what countries and in what numbers) would entail consultation between the White House and Congress (Carter 1980), but in practice, this consultation has been a formality and determinations are largely set by the White House. The president and his advisors also play key roles in shaping regulations and funding for resettlement programs. Indeed, concentration of power in the White House over the U.S. International

Refugee Assistance Program (IRAP) has not resulted in the “nonpolitical” attention to humanitarian concerns, as hoped for by Ellsworth and Hannum. Rather, for nearly 40 years, each presidential administration has shaped priorities about which refugees to resettle based on ideological and political considerations. To some extent, civil society actors, including faith-based organizations and ethnic interest groups, have influenced these processes through advocacy with the White House and Congress. But as recent history following the events of September 11, 2001, reveal, substantial activism is required to actually move presidential administrations to adopt inclusive and just refugee resettlement policies. One example of this was the successful lobbying of George W. Bush’s administration to begin admitting Iraqi refugees late in his presidency (Harding and Libal 2012).

Since the 2016 election of President Donald Trump, the challenges posed by concentrating power in the White House to determine U.S. refugee policy have become clear (International Crisis Group 2018). Within months, the Trump administration became a global leader in introducing measures to restrict immigration, refugee admissions, and those seeking asylum (Darrow 2018). Indeed, the manifestation of “restrictionism” under Trump is the most radical shift in U.S. immigration policy in more than 40 years and represents a rebuke of U.S. global leadership on these issues. The Trump administration has attempted to effectively close U.S. borders, limiting immigration and refugee resettlement from several—mostly Muslim majority—countries<sup>1</sup>; failed to provide due process rights to those claiming asylum at U.S. borders; enforced a “zero tolerance” policy that systematically separated parents and guardians from children at the U.S.-Mexico border and later detained families together; increasingly criminalized undocumented migrants, subjecting them to inhumane treatment during detention; and deported migrants without observing laws protecting due process rights (e.g., Bohmer and Shuman, Chapter 3, and Pierce, Bolter, and Selee 2018). Former attorney general Jeffrey Sessions reversed the interpretation of established standards for seeking asylum in the United States, including recognizing gender-based violence and victimization from gang violence as grounds for claiming persecution in certain cases (Blitz 2017). Immigration and Customs Enforcement has increased its targeting of businesses and communities where undocumented migrants live and work, detaining and deporting record numbers of migrants who have not committed crimes. And a new interpretation of the “public charge doctrine” promises to punish immigrants without permanent residence for accessing public benefits they have a legal right to use (Shear and Baumgaertner 2018; University of Minnesota Immigration and Human Rights Clinic 2018).

Of note, the Trump administration has sought to fundamentally transform the nearly 40-year-old refugee resettlement program with little reaction from Congress. Since President Trump entered office, annual refugee

admissions were reduced via Executive Order in fiscal year 2018 to 45,000 per year and substantively lowered again in fiscal year 2019 to 30,000 (U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2018).<sup>2</sup> While these cuts have raised alarm among human rights groups and voluntary resettlement agencies (VOLAGs) who historically partnered with the federal government to administer the refugee admissions program, their concerns have largely been ignored (International Crisis Group 2018).

In this chapter, we outline the historical roots and key features of the current U.S. refugee resettlement program, highlighting the important and sometimes contradictory legacy of community-based private actors in supplementing government support for refugees. We then profile several methods of engaging voluntarism in resettlement in three different U.S. states: Kentucky, Utah, and Connecticut. We demonstrate the diversity of approaches to resettlement at the state level and the strengths and limits of relying upon voluntarism as a key component of the refugee resettlement program.

## The History of the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program

A core principle of American identity has been the idea that Americans value self-sufficiency and achieving *individual* success through hard work and personal responsibility (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 1985; Rank, Hirschl, and Foster 2014). This idea has also been an integral part of the modern refugee resettlement program since its inception; indeed, job-training and English-language programs included in the policy were designed explicitly to foster “economic self-sufficiency” (Gonzalez Benson 2016). While scholars have pointed to a gap between the ideology of self-sufficiency and the reality of the struggle that newcomer refugees experience in the United States (Haffejee and East, Chapter 12; Darrow 2018), those providing community- and state-based services to refugees rarely highlight these limitations out of fear that Congress and the public will view the program as too costly. Thus, a key part of the successes of the refugee resettlement program—and simultaneously one of its limitations—is the reliance upon voluntarism, charitable giving, self-help initiatives, and “public-private partnerships” that help compensate for inadequate public supports for refugees.

## Resettlement of Refugees: 1880–1975

Historian Aristide Zolberg (2006) asserts that while the United States is often touted as a “nation of immigrants,” it has never been open to just “any immigrants” (1). “From the moment they managed their own affairs, well before political independence, Americans were determined to select who might join



them, and they have remained so ever since” (Zolberg 2006, 1). Zolberg describes the growing sentiment among political elites to limit immigration beginning in the 1880s, including the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. This was the same decade in which the Statue of Liberty was installed in New York Harbor. Between 1900 and 1920, the United States accepted over 14.5 million immigrants, mostly from Europe (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service 2016). Concerns over the rising number of immigrants living in the United States led to the creation of more selective immigration policy. The Immigration Act of 1917 contained many restrictive parameters. One provision that would greatly affect refugees in the future was a rule related to whether or not an immigrant was likely to become a “public charge” (dependent on the state) in making a determination of their admissibility to the United States. Originally written into an 1882 law (Zolberg 2006), the intent of the public charge doctrine was to restrict entry of those who were deemed to lack the physical and/or mental skills to gain employment and support themselves financially. According to Hester and associates (2018), “In 1903, the law further stipulated that any foreigner who became a public charge within five years of entry from causes that did not originate in the U.S. was subject to deportation.” The State Department used this provision to limit the number of Mexican immigrants into the United States by interpreting the public charge rule to apply to *anyone* who they determined would be unlikely to be able to support themselves (Breitman and Kraut 1987).

The vagueness of the public charge rule led to varying interpretations and, thus, different policies for immigrants or refugees during various periods of U.S. history. It directly reflected the core American value of self-sufficiency, but in practice, the notion of a public charge provided a powerful means to discriminate against certain immigrant and refugee populations. For example, in 1930 the Hoover administration expanded the rule to mean any immigrant not likely to find a job “under current market conditions,” severely restricting immigration during the Great Depression (Breitman and Kraut 1987, 7). These guidelines were in effect while large numbers of Jewish refugees were applying for visas to enter the United States, seeking to escape Nazi-controlled regions of Europe (Breitman and Kraut 1987). From 1933 through the end of World War II, the U.S. government was well aware of the persecution of Jews by the Nazis and actually debated making special exceptions for this population. Government officials and agencies argued over whether the public charge rule should be suspended for those facing persecution in Europe. But in a reflection of both U.S. isolationism and tolerance of anti-Semitism, the State Department used the public charge clause to justify excluding Jewish populations displaced by genocide (Breitman and Kraut 1987).

Jewish refugees also confronted newly established immigration quotas in the United States. The Immigration Act of 1924 instituted an annual quota system for all immigrants. It allowed visas for just 2 percent of the total population of each nationality already in the United States. However, the legislation used 1890 census data, which favored entry to those of British descent and other Northern Europeans. The Act also banned entry to the United States of anyone not eligible for citizenship, which eliminated most immigrants from Asia because of already-existing nationality laws (U.S. Department of State's Office of the Historian n.d.).

World War II prompted the largest mass (forced) migration in European history (Cohen 2011). Millions of Germans fled or were expelled, hundreds of thousands of Jewish survivors were forced out of their home countries, and citizens from various European countries escaped newly emerging Communist regimes. In December 1945, President Truman issued a directive on expediting admissions of "displaced persons and refugees" from Europe, prioritizing orphan children for resettlement. Truman's order expanded sponsorship of individuals to include humanitarian agencies. The public charge rule was applicable, however, which meant that sponsoring individuals or voluntary agencies were responsible for assuring that refugees—whether adults or children—received adequate private material support. As Truman explained:

Of the displaced persons and refugees whose entrance into the United States we will permit under this plan, it is hoped that the majority will be orphaned children. The provisions of law prohibiting the entry of persons likely to become public charges will be strictly observed. Responsible welfare organizations now at work in this field will guarantee that these children will not become public charges. Similar guarantees have or will be made on behalf of adult persons. The record of these welfare organizations throughout the past years has been excellent, and I am informed that no persons admitted under their sponsorship have ever become charges on their communities. Moreover, many of the immigrants will have close family ties in the United States and will receive the assistance of their relatives until they are in a position to provide for themselves. (Truman 1945)

This began a relationship between the U.S. government and voluntary agencies (VOLAG) for the responsibility of resettling refugees that exists today. One stipulation was that the VOLAG needed to cover refugees' travel expenses (Brown and Scribner 2014). This also echoes a policy that is still in place. When a refugee is accepted into the United States, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) pays their initial airfare. However, this is considered a temporary loan that the refugee must repay to the U.S. government (U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants n.d.). Thus, refugees arrive in the United States already in financial debt.

Truman's executive order helped nearly 40,000 refugees (Brown and Scribner 2014), but more permanent legislation was needed to deal with the mass migration throughout Europe. Congress eventually passed the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, which allowed for the temporary resettlement of displaced persons and refugees. Although the Act admitted 200,000 displaced persons to the United States over two years, it was predicated on an immigration quota system that afforded fewer slots to those from Eastern and Central Europe (Truman 1948); most Jewish refugees and Catholic displaced persons would be prevented from resettling in the United States. In a statement on June 25, 1948, Truman expressed displeasure with the legislation, saying, "If the Congress were still in session, I would return this bill without my approval and urge that a fairer, more humane bill be passed. In its present form this bill is flagrantly discriminatory. It mocks the American tradition of fair play" (para 2).

The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 was the first U.S. immigration law that addressed refugees explicitly. Although it was designed as temporary legislation, meant to address the specific population of displaced persons in Europe, it set the course for future refugee policy (Churgin 1996). The 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act (McCarran-Walter Act) opened the door for admission of tens of thousands of the more than one million displaced persons in Europe as refugees. And, in 1962, Congress passed the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, which authorized "the president to provide assistance to refugees whenever it was 'in the interest of the United States'" (Garcia 2017, 4). As Garcia notes, with the passing of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (Hart-Celler Act), small regional quotas for refugees were incorporated into the legislation. Until the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, however, U.S. policy toward refugees was made in an ad hoc fashion that privileged European refugees over those from other regions.

### **The Aftermath of the Vietnam War and the Refugee Act of 1980**

The end of the Vietnam War created a mass exodus of refugees from Southeast Asia. Between 1970 and 1974, the United States only admitted 15,045 refugees (listed as immigrants), with more than 14,000 from Vietnam (Gordon 1985). In 1975, when the last U.S. troops withdrew from Vietnam, more than 130,000 Southeast Asian refugees were admitted to the United States through humanitarian parole (U.S. Department of State Office of Admissions—Refugee Processing Center 2018). The mass exodus from Indochina continued, and by 1979, President Carter decided to lift quota restrictions to allow 168,000 refugees per year. The Southeast Asian refugee crisis impelled Carter and Congress to act in the landmark 1980 Refugee Act. The new law standardized resettlement procedures, formed the basis of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), and created the U.S. Refugee

Resettlement Program “for the effective resettlement of refugees and to assist them to achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible after arrival in the United States” (U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement 2012, para 1). The Act also aimed to standardize criteria for which groups of refugees would be prioritized for admission and clarified the roles of different federal agencies in refugee resettlement (Refugee Act 1980). The legislation included a stipulation that refugees were not required to seek employment for their first 60 days in the country, but this provision was eliminated 2 years later by Congress. This further made clear the emphasis on refugee “self-sufficiency” as soon as possible. At the same time provisions providing language classes and employment training for new refugees were deemphasized, making it less likely that many would easily gain the necessary skills to secure meaningful and well-paying employment.

### **Overview of the U.S. Refugee Resettlement**

Since 1980, the United States has permanently resettled more than three million refugees through the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program, via a variety of programs administered by ORR (Refugee Council USA 2017). The Department of Homeland Security’s U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS) has been responsible since 2002 for identifying and vetting security risks that may be associated with individual refugees slated for resettlement. The State Department’s Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration works with the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Department of Health and Human Services, and U.S. government recognized voluntary agencies to determine where refugees will initially be resettled (U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement 2015). The president, in consultation with key advisors in the State Department, Homeland Security, and other staff, proposes admissions targets and priorities for which populations of refugees to accept in a given year.

Since passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, annual admissions to the United States peaked in fiscal year 1980 at 207,000 and were lowest in fiscal year 2018 at 22,491 refugees (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration 2018a; U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2018). Widely varying refugee admissions levels were due to political and ideological pressures within the White House and to a lesser degree from Congress and the U.S. public. Since the 1980 Refugee Act passed, more than one million refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos were admitted to the United States (Packer 2015). Between fiscal years 1989 and 1994, more than 100,000 refugees were admitted each year (U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2018). Reflecting the impact of



the September 11 attacks, in fiscal years 2002 and 2003, admissions were restricted to just over 27,000 and 28,000 refugees, respectively (U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2018). By fiscal year 2007, admission of Iraqi and Afghan refugees, through both the traditional resettlement program and a new Special Immigrant Visa Program, expanded considerably, reflecting political pressure by U.S. military veterans and human rights groups to address the humanitarian consequences of the U.S.-led war in Iraq (Harding and Libal 2012).<sup>3</sup>

While resettlement numbers under the Obama administration ranged from 56,000 to 70,000 in most years, by fiscal year 2016, its admissions goals rose to nearly 85,000 refugees and aimed to reach 110,000 in fiscal year 2017 (U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2016). In September 2016, President Obama convened an international summit of leaders on refugees, demanding that the United States and the global community meet the test of “our common humanity” reflected in the mass migration stemming from the war in Syria:

And finally, this crisis is a test of our common humanity—whether we give in to suspicion and fear and build walls, or whether we see ourselves in another. Those girls being trafficked and tortured, they could be our daughters. That little boy on the beach could be our son or our grandson. We cannot avert our eyes or turn our backs. To slam the door in the face of these families would betray our deepest values. It would deny our own heritage as nations, including the United States of America, that have been built by immigrants and refugees. And it would be to ignore a teaching at the heart of so many faiths that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us; that we welcome the stranger in our midst. And just as failure to act in the past—for example, by turning away Jews fleeing Nazi Germany—is a stain on our collective conscience, I believe history will judge us harshly if we do not rise to this moment. (Obama 2016)

By highlighting the consequences of failing to act on behalf of Jews seeking refuge from genocide in Europe, as well as religious underpinnings to support Syrian refugees, Obama aimed to build consensus at home and abroad for accepting refugees. Yet, a few months later, when Donald Trump became president, the White House moved to radically restrict refugee resettlement. In fiscal year 2017, fewer than 54,000 refugees were resettled to the United States, and 2018 marked the lowest admissions level in the history of the program, with fewer than 23,000 refugees admitted (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration 2018a; U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2018).

**Table 4.1. Total Refugee Arrivals in Fiscal Year 2016–2018**

Region	Total Refugee Arrivals		
	2016	2017	2018
Africa	31,624	20,232	10,459
East Asia	12,518	5,173	3,668
Europe	3,957	5,205	3,612
Latin America/Caribbean	1,340	1,688	955
Near East/South Asia	35,555	21,418	3,797
Total	84,994	53,716	22,491

What is also striking under President Trump is the shift in regional prioritization (see Table 4.1). Departing from established past practice, Trump largely closed off access to refugees from the Middle East (Near East/South Asia in ORR records), a stark shift from earlier administrations (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration 2018a). In fiscal year 2016 (under Obama), more than 35,000 refugees were admitted from the Middle East, while in fiscal year 2018 (under Trump), fewer than 4,000 were admitted from the same region.

### **Resettlement Programs Implemented at the State and Local Levels**

Since the refugee resettlement program's inception in 1980, California, New York, Texas, Michigan, Ohio, and Arizona are the top states for resettlement in most years. Connecticut, Kentucky, and Utah have all resettled a much smaller number of refugees since 1980, but they are also much smaller states in terms of population. Wyoming is currently the only state that does not participate in the refugee resettlement program, while Arkansas, Delaware, Hawaii, Mississippi, Montana, and West Virginia, have resettled fewer than 500 refugees since 2002 (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Office of Admissions 2018b).

Implementation of the resettlement program and financial and other supports for refugees are administered through national resettlement voluntary agencies, which subcontract with affiliated local providers, sometimes called refugee resettlement organizations (RROs) (Darrow 2015). This financial aid is more limited than in other countries that have historically resettled refugees. The Reception and Placement Program (R&P Program) provides “the initial building blocks for a refugee’s successful transition” during the first 90 days after arrival, when the Department of State offers support to the refugee and resettlement organization (Darrow 2015, 92). Following the first 90 days,

RROs continue to administer financial and other resources to refugees, the most significant of which is a modest monthly cash benefit given through the first eight months of the initial resettlement period. As Darrow (2015) notes, “The intention of this support is to give the refugee a leg up on their journey to self-sufficiency, to stabilize the individual or family so that they can gain access to the labor market, and otherwise thrive” (92).

Nonetheless, the level of assistance that refugees receive from the federal government, states, and refugee resettlement agencies is almost uniformly inadequate to meet basic needs. Refugee Cash Assistance levels, for example, vary by state and are generally indexed to the levels of cash aid provided through the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program—which does not provide enough by itself to lift a family out of poverty (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Refugee Resettlement, n.d.). The resettlement program’s success thus hinges on the efforts of service providers and large teams of volunteers to help refugees resettled to the United States transition to economic “self-sufficiency” within a short period of time (see Haffejee and East, Chapter 12; Eby, Iverson, Smyers, and Kekic 2011).

### **The Centrality of Volunteers in U.S. Refugee Resettlement**

Historically, volunteers, community members, and others in the private sector have played a critical role providing support and services to refugees in the United States (Eby, Iverson, Smyers, and Kekic 2011; Haines 2010). This work has often been facilitated by members of faith communities, including Christian, Jewish, and Muslim groups, and the major voluntary agencies that have been authorized to administer resettlement nationwide primarily represent Christian and Jewish organizations. Next, we provide insights into the roles and motivations of volunteers working in Connecticut, Kentucky, and Utah based on 28 semi-structured interviews with volunteers and service providers that the authors conducted between 2016–2018. While admitting a relatively small number of refugees, these states have developed substantial programs incorporating volunteers.<sup>4</sup> In Connecticut, a local agency experiments with community cosponsorship, arguably the most robust model of engaging volunteers in the work of refugee resettlement. Kentucky represents a “Wilson/Fish” state, which devolves responsibility for resettlement to a nongovernmental organization, which, in turn, is responsible for overseeing the program and work of other resettlement organizations in this “alternative” privatized model of coordination and implementation. Finally, Utah demonstrates a hybrid (or more “traditional”) approach that balances state coordination with robust private, nongovernmental organizational involvement in resettlement. Each model is predicated on substantial input from volunteers, though the extent to which volunteers exercise control over resettlement processes varies.

### **Connecticut: Experimenting with Community Cosponsorship**

One of the smallest U.S. states geographically, Connecticut consistently ranks among the wealthiest states, though it is also one of the most “unequal” states and has one of the highest costs of living nationally. While resettlement organizations have been active in refugee resettlement in the state for decades, a relatively small number of refugees are resettled in Connecticut each year. The state’s high housing costs, uneven public transportation, limited social welfare supports, and a low rate of job growth are among the challenges facing new immigrant arrivals.

Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services (IRIS), one of three Connecticut-based RROs, resettles the largest number of refugees in the state. Until 2015, IRIS managed a caseload of approximately 300 newly resettled refugees per year, relying on volunteers to provide tutoring, transportation, and other critical support. The group took a lead role in the state in resettling Arabic-speaking refugees during both the Iraq and Syrian wars. Throughout its history, IRIS worked with volunteer-led community groups that resettled refugees, though this was usually done at a small scale; the majority of their efforts focused on “traditional” refugee resettlement.

By 2015, media attention about the Syrian migration “crisis,” along with the outcry associated with the drowning of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, had made refugee issues highly visible (Mackey 2015). In the United States, the Obama administration pledged to resettle 15,000 Syrian refugees in 2016, a symbolic gesture in light of the more than five million Syrians displaced by civil war. In late 2015, citing a recent terrorist attack in Paris, a majority of U.S. governors (including then Indiana governor Mike Pence) publicly opposed resettling any Syrian refugees in their state. The election of Donald Trump, who used explicit anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric in his presidential campaign, drew further public attention to U.S. refugee policy. The backlash against Trump’s 2017 proposed travel ban and sharp cut in refugee admissions—announced on his eighth day in office—offered a new opportunity to revive and expand volunteer-led refugee resettlement in Connecticut.

As occurred in communities nationwide, in Connecticut, thousands of people spontaneously protested against Trump’s policies, demanding that the United States admit Syrian refugees fleeing war and persecution. Chris George, executive director of IRIS, stated a willingness to have IRIS resettle Syrian refugees in Connecticut, a move that coincided with growing community interest in sponsoring refugee families (Griffin 2015). Soon, dozens of local groups and Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith-based institutions across the state contacted IRIS to find out how they could “cosponsor” a (Syrian) refugee family in their community. Throughout 2016 and 2017, IRIS took the lead in reviving community cosponsorship of refugees and helped



support the formation of dozens of local cosponsorship groups across the state. Unlike in the past, refugee resettlement led by volunteers became an integral aspect of IRIS's work in this period. Citing the high level of community interest, George proclaimed 2017 the "year . . . of the volunteers. . . . It's really taken off here, and we'd like to see it replicated across the country" (Stannard 2017).

Trained and directly supported by IRIS, dozens of cosponsorship groups assumed many key roles typically carried out by professional resettlement agencies. IRIS required local groups, most of which were new, to support a refugee family and take responsibility for costs associated with resettlement in their community for at least one year. Cosponsorship groups had to commit to help refugees locate housing, connect them to social services, help secure employment, provide connections to schools, access English-language courses, and find transportation. Consistent with U.S. refugee policy, these efforts also had to prioritize achieving "self-sufficiency" for refugees (typically within one year).

The cosponsorship model promoted by IRIS serves a number of significant goals, at both an organizational and a community level. In less than three years, a dramatic increase in cosponsorship occurred: IRIS supported 45 (mostly new) groups to resettle nearly 300 refugees in more than 30 communities (Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services 2018). The cosponsorship program thus strengthened the overall capacity of IRIS, allowing it to maximize its resources and provide more refugees with more services than would normally occur. At its peak, in 2016–2017, IRIS more than doubled the number of refugees it resettled across Connecticut, with nearly 40 percent of this increase due to cosponsorship efforts.

Among other outcomes, interviews underscore how community cosponsorship provided greater visibility and support for refugees. In order to scale up resettlement in the state to admit nearly double the number of refugees that had been placed in recent years, IRIS staff had to train and mentor new community groups. In Connecticut, hundreds of people without prior experience became involved in refugee resettlement. Aside from connections to faith-based groups, participants came from diverse backgrounds, including local government, the business sector, local ethnic associations, health sector, and education sector.

Under the cosponsorship model, the social networks that refugees typically form in host countries, essential to their ability to thrive, were dependent on the support of volunteers rather than staff members in a local resettlement organization. Most volunteers had deep ties to their local community and could thus help connect refugees to important community institutions and relevant services. As Chris George observed, "It's better for the refugee family to have a community group working with them that knows

the schools and knows where to shop and knows where the jobs are” (Stanard 2017).

In light of their history in a local community, volunteers also proved uniquely positioned to solve problems facing refugees and to advocate on their behalf. The cosponsorship model thus enabled volunteers to address stereotypes and potential hostility to newly relocated refugees. This has been significant in Connecticut, where many refugee families were placed in small communities lacking ethnic, racial, and religious diversity and without a history of refugee resettlement. One interviewee reflected:

And if somebody is anti-immigration, or anti-Muslim immigration, then of course the best education is meeting somebody from that culture. . . . Just sharing something simple like good food makes people connect with each other. So that I think is the great advantage for the community. It connects people to a different part of the world, and different cultures, who might not otherwise have connected. And it opens up forums for debate and discussion. (Interview, August 29, 2018)

Interviews for also illustrate how these volunteer efforts concretely impacted refugees. Those who were resettled in Connecticut through cosponsorship in 2016–2017 were able to find employment, learn English, and adapt to their environment more quickly than those resettled directly by IRIS (Interview, November 22, 2017). By helping build diffuse nodes of community support, volunteers facilitated community integration among refugees, helping them generate vital social capital. This strongly suggests that community cosponsorship can help refugees quickly achieve “self-sufficiency,” thereby supporting a fundamental principle of U.S. refugee policy.

### **Kentucky: Volunteers in a “Wilson Fish” State**

Kentucky has a long history of receiving refugees, beginning more than 40 years ago, with the end of the Vietnam War (Catholic Charities of Louisville, Inc. 2018a). Kentucky is 1 of 13 states that opt for an alternative method of resettlement administration known as Wilson-Fish (U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement 2018). Functioning as a “Wilson-Fish” state means that state-wide support for refugee resettlement occurs via a nonprofit organization rather than the state government (Welch 2017). In this case, the Kentucky Office for Refugees (KOR) is housed within Catholic Charities of Louisville. KOR receives funding from ORR, and KOR, in turn, awards this funding through grants to resettlement agencies and community groups within the state and provides grants management and program development resources (Catholic Charities of Louisville, Inc. 2018b). Several staff and volunteers interviewed for this study suggested that one strength of working within a

Wilson Fish state was having increased flexibility, with the ability to adapt quickly and create new programs based on community feedback (Interview, July 31, 2017, and Interview, August 22, 2017).

These interviews also underscored the welcoming nature of Kentucky's largest city, Louisville. Described by one participant as a "progressive city" in a "very red state" (Interview, July 31, 2017), the city's long-standing history of accepting refugees and its mayor, Greg Fischer, were frequently recognized (Interview, September 27, 2017). One volunteer described a speech the mayor delivered at a refugee community event, saying, "He stood up and said, 'We welcome you; we hope more come to the United States. We're thrilled to have you. This is a country built from immigrants. And you know we're here for you'" (Interview, November 15, 2017). In 2011, Mayor Fischer signed a resolution making Louisville an international compassionate city, joining a global campaign called the Charter for Compassion (Charter for Compassion 2017a). The charter challenges members to create spaces where "every man, woman and child treats others as they wish to be treated—with dignity, equity and respect" (Charter for Compassion 2017b, para 2). Part of the objective is to work toward achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Currently, almost 50 countries have signed the charter, and an additional 70 cities (55 in the United States) have affirmed it, including Louisville (Charter for Compassion 2017b).

Louisville is not the only city where refugees resettle in Kentucky. KOR also works with resettlement agencies in Lexington, Owensboro, and Bowling Green. Initially, when Muslim refugees started to be resettled in Owensboro, some staff were concerned about how the refugees would be accepted in a mostly rural, Christian area. However, when refugees were asked by staff how they were faring, the majority responded by saying that they loved living in Owensboro because "it's safe, it's quiet," and the "people are nice" (Interview, July 31, 2017). In fact, in November 2016, when an Islamic center was defaced for the second time that year, the scheduled clean-up was cancelled, because, before it could happen, a local Christian church had already repaired the vandalism. The community then decided to gather and write positive messages in sidewalk chalk at the community center (WFIE 2016).

Support from volunteers is an integral component to successful resettlement in Kentucky, especially in light of financial strains on to organizations because of cuts in new refugee arrivals imposed by the Trump administration. Since funding for resettlement agencies depends on the number of refugee arrivals, some resettlement agencies have laid off staff (Cepla 2018). This caused one staff member of a resettlement organization to lament the loss of "years of skills and experience" (Interview, December 15, 2017). Even before these cuts, however, the agency worked hard to involve volunteers in all aspects of its work, creating opportunities for community members to

participate in letter-writing campaigns, tutor in English, or buy groceries for a newly arrived refugee family (Interview, December 15, 2017).

One volunteer, who works fulltime, arranges her work schedule so that she can volunteer weekly. One of her activities is helping other volunteers provide daycare to a group of two- to five-year-old children while their parents attend an English-language class provided by the resettlement agency. Staff and volunteers cite English proficiency as one of the biggest challenges for refugees in finding a job that pays enough for them to support their families. One interviewee noted that “everything refugees do job-wise would be more successful with English” (Interview, December 15, 2017). Throughout Kentucky, resettlement agencies design and support programs, while volunteers meet with refugees weekly. This synergy between agencies and volunteers may provide refugees a better chance for successful integration. With cuts in staff, agencies will likely find it more difficult to provide adequate training for volunteers, which over time may create a more ad hoc nature of support for refugees.

In Kentucky, some people volunteer on their own, but, traditionally, volunteers do so as part of a larger group. It is common for churches, mosques, families, and even businesses to sponsor a newly arrived refugee family and provide mentorship to the family for at least three to six months (Interview, December 15, 2017, and Interview, September 27, 2017). Some community groups raise funds to help a refugee family for the first few months, and others help in nonmonetary ways; this depends on the approach of the resettlement agency that the volunteers work with. Some agencies require volunteers to raise funds, while others prohibit this type of fund-raising. In preparation for their arrival, volunteer groups are often responsible for furnishing a family’s new apartment, meeting them at the airport, and helping to prepare a welcome meal. Members of the group then visit the family on a regular basis, helping them become familiar with their new community. Since everyday tasks may be different from in the refugee family’s home country, volunteers assist with grocery shopping, banking, and teaching the family how to navigate public transportation (Interview, September 27, 2017, and Interview, December 15, 2017).

A volunteer described how people often begin volunteering on a one-time basis or for an event, but once they get to know a refugee family, they become more involved, including volunteering abroad. Based on experiences in Greece, the interviewee speaks to community groups in Kentucky about the condition refugees face in other countries in order to dispel common myths and raise public awareness about the hardships of forced migration. They noted that the public often assumes that “when things are good, we need to build a wall to keep people out . . . because everyone wants to live here” (Interview, September 26, 2017). In fact, according to the interviewee, most refugees want to return to their home country, but in cases such as



Syria when return is unlikely, it is important to welcome refugees. “We need the diversity, the richness of folks” (Interview, September 26, 2017).

Volunteers in Kentucky cited a range of reasons for getting involved. One common motivation was religious values, including the notion of “welcoming the stranger.” One volunteer said that doing this work is putting their “faith into action” (Interview, September 26, 2017). Others became active for political reasons, as a way of challenging policy and negative rhetoric about refugees. One volunteer had been contemplating volunteer work, but when they heard then presidential candidate Donald Trump talk about “closing the borders for refugees” (Interview, November 15, 2017), they decided to act. Several resettlement agency staff noted a “record number” of volunteers after President Trump was elected and announced his travel ban (Interview, September 27, 2017). Although heartened by this development, some interviewees expressed concern about a drop in the number of volunteers when news coverage focused less on refugees (Interview, December 15, 2017).

Some of the motivations of volunteers seem to come from a practical sense of awareness that there is a need that exists, and someone must fill it. One volunteer, referring to how people in Kentucky help each other, said “this is just something people do here” (Interview, January 17, 2018). Another said, although inspired by faith, it really comes down to the straightforward idea that if “people need help, you need to just help them” (Interview, January 31, 2018). A resettlement agency staff member elaborated on this type of practical helping of neighbors, noting that there is an “authentic hospitality” and “general friendliness” in the state, which aids in successful resettlement for refugees (Interview, September 27, 2017). Those working for resettlement organizations and volunteers interviewed for this study underscored the importance of voluntary action in building community- and state-level support for refugees, even in the face of broader politics of exclusion.

### **Utah: Robust State and Private Partnership**

Utah’s history plays an important role in how the state addresses the needs of refugees today. Nineteenth-century settlers fleeing religious persecution are recognized as “refugee pioneers,” who founded the state. An appreciation of refugees directly influences state policies and efforts to create a welcoming community. In 2015, when most Republican governors declared Syrian refugees unwelcome, Utah’s Republican governor Gary Herbert dissented. He suggested that there should be a way to protect the state from “terrorists” without discriminating against refugees from predominantly Muslim countries. Instead of refusing Syrian refugees, he met with national security officials to understand the refugee-screening process (Jordan 2016).

Utah's commitment to refugees has led to some tensions between immigrant and refugee communities. According to an interview with a service provider, some in the immigrant community felt that they received fewer benefits and services than refugees (Interview, January 13, 2017). To address this, the Office for New Americans was created in Salt Lake City in 2016, with the goal of integrating all refugees and immigrants. Anyone born outside of the country is considered a *New American*. One of the first priorities of the office was to create a New Americans Taskforce Welcoming Plan, comprised of approximately 100 business leaders, legislators, providers, and community partners. After drafting the plan, the agency sought community feedback using town-hall-style meetings, focus groups, and one-on-one meetings of local community members (Interview, January 13, 2017). The result is a strategic plan to work toward the goals of making Utah the "most welcoming state," ensuring that "all Salt Lake residents live in safe, healthy, and connected communities" and are able to maximize "the economic potential of New Americans" (New Americans Taskforce Welcoming Plan n.d., 1).

The Office for New Americans works with the Utah Department of Workforce Services and two local voluntary refugee resettlement agencies, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Catholic Community Services (CCS). Additionally, Utah's Department of Workforce Services partners with Utah State University and Salt Lake Community College to provide services through the Refugee Education and Training Center. This partnership began when research showed that the average wage for resettled refugees in Utah is approximately \$8.25 per hour, inadequate to meet the basic needs of refugee families (Utah Department of Workforce Services 2016). The Refugee Education and Training Center offers employment and training services to assist refugees in attaining more long-term, livable incomes. They also provide youth education and community-led events (Utah Department of Workforce Services 2016). Recently, they initiated a project to create a commercial kitchen that will also act as a "community education kitchen," a place where refugees receive training for food service and culinary skills as well as a space for the refugee community to use to prepare food for events (Interview, September 13, 2018).

Interviewees cite a uniquely collaborative quality to the resettlement community in Utah. The two resettlement agencies, CCS and IRC, work together along with the Asian Association of Utah (AAU). The AAU is a nonprofit focused on helping refugees from all countries, providing services such as mental health counseling, extended case management, assistance with secondary migration, and substance abuse programs (Interview, January 13, 2017). Each of the organizations has its own programming and services, yet the groups avoid competing for funding by communicating clearly among themselves, offering different services, and then actively referring clients to each other depending on refugee needs. Every month, they participate in a

refugee provider roundtable discussion to facilitate such cooperation (Interview, January 25, 2017).

Agencies involved in resettlement in Utah also work with business leaders to assist in securing employment for refugees. The Refugee Services Office, within the Utah Department of Workforce Services, receives federal funding for refugee resettlement and contracts with the resettlement agencies to provide needed services. Additionally, the state sets aside an annual budget of approximately \$200,000 for capacity building within refugee communities. These funds support trainings and mini-grants for various community organizations (Interview, January 13, 2017). The state also allows some of their Temporary Aid for Needy Family (TANF) funds to go toward refugee case management. And in special cases, for single parents with children, some of these funds are used to subsidize housing temporarily (Interview, January 25, 2017). The resettlement agencies work alongside the Office for New Americans to coordinate with local area churches and community members, mobilizing community members to do political advocacy with Utah legislators.

The final and critical element of the resettlement community is volunteers. While Utah does not promote a community cosponsorship model, they do rely on local volunteers to help refugees integrate into their new communities. Utah was ranked the top state of all 50 U.S. states in the percentage of residents volunteering, according to Volunteering and Civic Life in America's 2015 report (CNCS n.d.). Nationally, the volunteer rate is 29.4 percent; in Utah, it is 43.2 percent (CNCS n.d.).

Volunteers primarily assist resettlement agencies with tasks such as accessing public transportation, utilizing local resources such as libraries or community centers, or practicing English. Unlike some community cosponsorship models, volunteers do not provide services for refugees like financial support for housing or assistance with attaining social service benefits (Interview, January 13, 2017). One volunteer, who has been actively mentoring new refugee families for seven years, said the main goal of volunteering is to befriend refugees who are attempting to rebuild their lives in Utah. Although helping them learn how to navigate their new communities is necessary, "the most important job is to be a friend" (Interview, September 13, 2018). Particularly, in the face of the current political climate, in which refugee families in some states may be afraid of heightened discrimination and anti-immigrant policies, such "be-friending" is crucial to integration and refugee well-being.

While the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has been involved in international humanitarian programs to support refugees since the mid-1980s, they have taken a more prominent role in Utah in recent years. Mormon leadership sent out "A First Presidency Letter" in 2015, urging parishioners to respond to the refugee crisis. Since then, there has been a powerful response;

the church has partnered with other churches and donated to refugee resettlement agencies across the country. The church also started a campaign, “I Was a Stranger,” which urges women and girls to assist refugees in their communities however they can, asking them to contemplate “what if *their* story were *my* story?” and then respond to the call within themselves (Burton 2016, para 11).

Eby, Iverson, Smyers, and Kekic (2011) argue that the involvement of faith-based communities has led to the United States being the leading refugee resettlement country in the world, though this distinction is now in question at least in the short term, under the Trump administration. They note the role of faith communities in helping refugees in areas such as employment, housing, and social connection, providing them with cultural knowledge, and facilitating their integration into local communities. This is certainly the case in Utah. One volunteer cited her fortune to live in the state: “There’s really good organizations. And we’re trying to work together and collaborate to focus on what’s best for our state, and that includes what’s best for refugees” (Interview, September 13, 2018).

## Conclusion

Refugee admissions have been a key part of U.S. humanitarian and foreign policy for more than 70 years (García 2017; Loescher 2017). Civil society actors, including faith-based voluntary agencies and resettlement organizations, have advocated for increasing admissions and for particular groups of refugees to be admitted to the United States. Yet, the groups have played a more profound role in carrying out support for refugees once they arrive in the United States. Resettlement has always been predicated on the involvement of volunteers, faith-based institutions, and community groups. While voluntary agencies and refugee resettlement organizations have generally avoided politicizing admissions and resettlement, they face a crossroads today when the Trump administration seeks to transform the refugee program as part of an effort to restrict immigration to the United States in general. As García (2017) notes, “the major challenge will be to raise public consciousness about refugees—and the conditions that produce them—so that fears and cultural biases do not negatively influence assessments of who is ‘worthy’ of admissions to the United States” (203).

In this context we underscore the importance of community-based voluntarism and state-level advocacy in support of refugees. Given shifting political dynamics, it is imperative to build public support for the refugee resettlement program. As recent polls by the Pew Research Center indicate, the Trump administration’s policy decisions and rhetoric have had an impact on the public. In 2018, among Republican and Republican-leaning independents, only 26 percent agreed that the United States has a responsibility to accept



refugees (Hartig 2018). Overall, a slim majority (51%) of Americans agreed that the country had such a responsibility, though whites are less likely to support refugee admission than African Americans and Latinos. In light of the polarization of refugee and immigration policies, one theme underscored by those we interviewed is the importance of building broad-based community involvement in refugee resettlement, precisely to create public support for the refugee resettlement program. Engaging at the grassroots, community level, through voluntarism and community cosponsorship, is one means to build such support for refugees—one community, one state at a time.

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## Notes

1. As of April 2019 this includes North Korea, Venezuela, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen.

2. In FY 2019, the Trump administration has recommended admissions ceilings by region as follows: Africa, 11,000; East Asia, 4,000; Europe and Central Asia, 3,000; Latin America and the Caribbean, 3,000; and the Near East and South Asia, 9,000 (U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2017–2018). This differs markedly from the last year of the Obama administration, which, for FY 2018, had recommended admissions of 40,000 from the Near East and South Asia; 35,000 from Africa; 12,000 from Asia; and 9,000 combined for Europe and Latin America/Caribbean (U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2016).

3. Toward the end of the Obama administration, refugee arrivals reflected only part of a much larger number of individuals who were served by the Department of Health and Human Services under the broader refugee program. In FY 2016, for example, nearly 85,000 refugees were resettled, while approximately 25,000 were recognized as asylees, and 87,111 Haitian and Cuban entrants were also part of the ORR program. In addition, more than 14,000 Special Immigrant Visa holders (Iraqis and Afghans) and 797 victims of trafficking were admitted. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children and Families 2018).

4. Between 2002 and 2018, Utah (population 3.1 million in 2017) admitted 14,146 refugees; Connecticut (population 3.5 million in 2017) admitted 7,407 refugees; and Kentucky (population 4.4 million in 2017) admitted 21,020 refugees (U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Office of Admissions 2018b).

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