



Self-Sufficiency for Refugees: Why it Matters



A Policy Brief
Prepared by:
Nada Blassy

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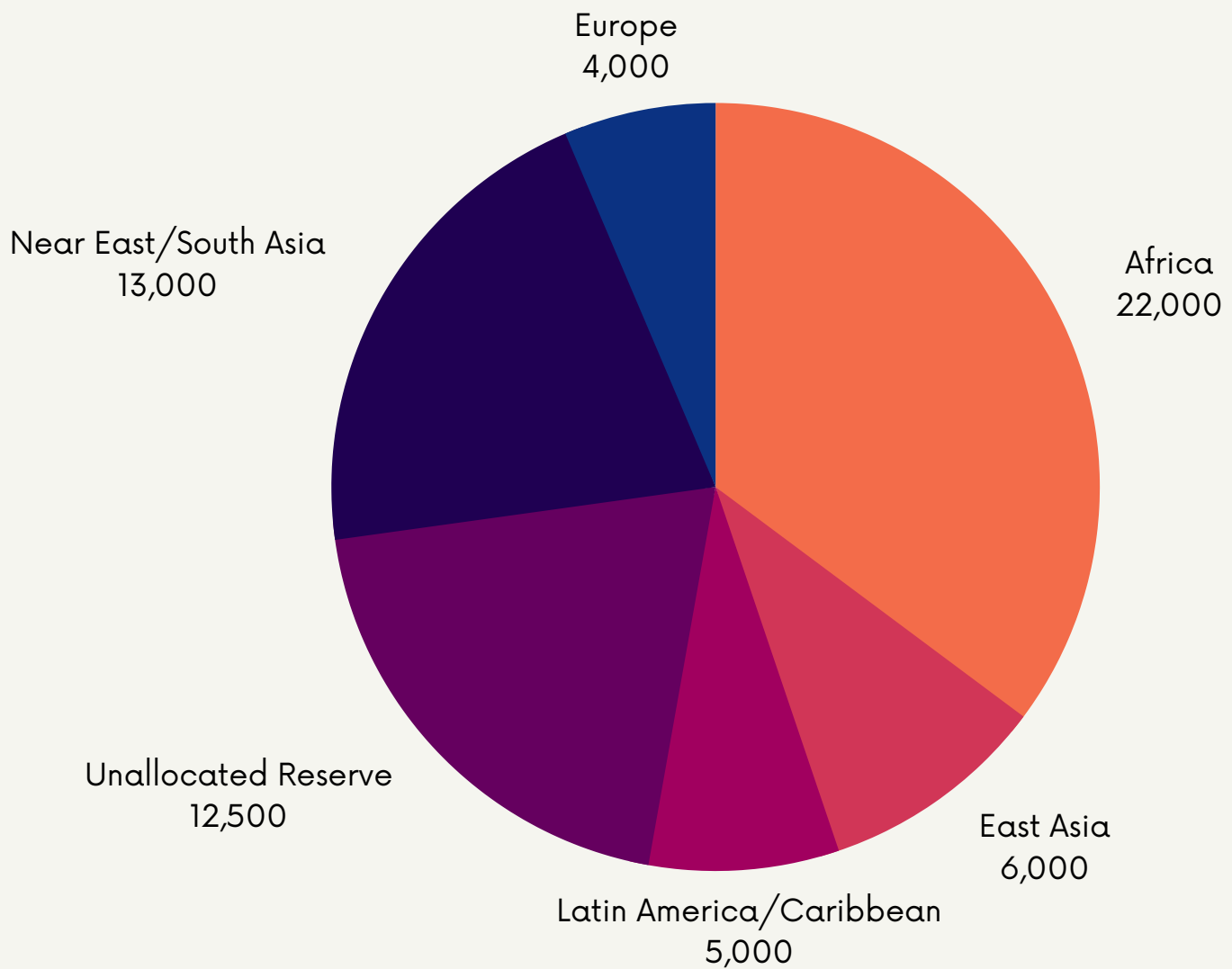
Executive Summary

Numerous federal agencies in the United States dedicated to refugee services came to fruition after the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980 (United States Department of State, 2021). The goal of these entities is to create, develop, and facilitate programming intended to target aspects of life that will empower refugees to become self-sufficient. Self-sufficiency for refugees commonly means being financially and emotionally stable without external help.

While the primary programs available include English language learning, navigating health insurance options, accessing affordable housing, and obtaining employment opportunities, there is still a lack of long-term self-sufficiency programming for refugees after resettlement. Services from the federal government and NGOs predominantly offer support for less than a year, yet expect refugees to become entirely self-sufficient, which takes years to achieve. An expectation like that is simply unrealistic. Paving the way for more refugee long-term self-sufficiency programming requires changes from the federal agencies involved, the people who work in those agencies, and improvements to the issues that refugees face. Providing refugees with skills and avenues to apply themselves will allow them to learn how to contribute positively to society. Doing so will honor and add to their existing skillset and improve their integration over time.

In this brief, I recommend strengthening infrastructure to welcome more refugees, dedicating more funding to educate and advocate for refugee self-sufficiency and empowerment, and establishing a more apparent differentiation with funding for federal, state, and NGO entities. Increasing staffing across all sectors, utilizing non-profits and community sponsorship, and incorporating refugee feedback in all forms of programming are additional essential steps for bettering outcomes for refugees in the long term. By investing in refugee self-sufficiency programs, as a society, we are promoting equity, economic empowerment, community development, and building a positive international image.

2022 Projected Arrivals



Existing Policies & Why Current Programming Needs to Change

Current programming for refugees after resettlement inadequately supports them in achieving long-term financial, emotional, and physical stability. In other words, what it takes to be considered “self-sufficient.” Programming models that focus on refugee self-sufficiency are frequently overlooked and are not prioritized in the United States, especially as international crises continue to escalate and displace thousands. Also, refugees continue to face endured trauma, ongoing health concerns, language barriers, and cultural differences. When working with a vulnerable population wired to survive and recover from trauma, it is intuitive for nonprofits, resettlement agencies, and other entities to focus efforts on immediate, tangible assistance for refugees. Examples of this assistance includes focusing on food security, clothing, and shelter. While those are basic needs and should be provided, it is necessary for entities to prioritize programming that provides refugees with financial literacy and other developmental workshops to promote their independence, create spaces where refugees can build their self-esteem, and encourage refugees to understand their mental health concerns. That way, over time, refugees can begin to feel empowered, and truly self-sufficient.

Another concern about current policies is that each federal department operates independently, which creates a disconnect of services. Examples of federal departments with programming intended to implement refugee self-sufficiency include the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Administration for Children and Families Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Reception and Placement Program (R&P) and Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange (CORE). Many of these departments have program services that overlap, which complicates the ways in which services are distributed. Additionally, numerous nonprofit organizations receive grants and funding to work towards the same goals alongside states. While this may be an easier route, it is not the most beneficial. Key challenges remain as information from these departments is outdated, hard to locate, and difficult to understand, especially since documents are poorly translated. Departments across all sectors also suffer from being understaffed, underpaid, and overworked as the number of refugees admitted into the United States has increased exceptionally from 15,000 to 62,500 this year (United States Department of State, 2021). This hinders their ability to continue to meet the needs of all refugee populations. There is still a vast gap between refugee service providers and refugee clients, as many lack cultural humility and experience burnout, which needs to be addressed. Refugees will continue to feel helpless and stuck in a cycle of poverty and instability if they are only dependent on the government and direction from understaffed, overworked, and inefficient organizations.

Furthermore, HHS claims it will “maintain our humanitarian commitments” to empower refugees to become self-sufficient; however, there is no clear structure or plan (United States Department of State, 2021). The Appropriations Committee’s 2022 budget implies that directly dispersing funds into offices and organizations is more favorable than spending time, energy, staffing, and resources developing programming for refugees. Clearly, there is financial support for the idea of refugee self-sufficiency, but it is a disservice to refugees when there is a great deal of structural disorganization and programs center around the immediate needs during transition rather than long-term outcomes.

There are multiple root issues that add to the complexity of what happens to refugees after they are resettled in the United States, which leaves significant room for improvement.

There is a strong foundational structure and framework in which all these different entities are at play, however, support can be inconsistent, inefficient, and ultimately inadequate. While this policy brief intends to highlight the importance of promoting self-sufficiency programming for refugees, changes need to be made on a structural level first.

“There is a lot of good and nice poeple who’s helping me and my family. If they didn’t help me or my family we wouldn’t be strong like now.”

- A middle school student

Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations are feasible, appropriate, and necessary for the United States as refugee resettlement is one of the “most visible manifestations of a values-based foreign policy, demonstrating American humanitarian leadership. It is also a concrete reflection of the United States’ commitment to human rights” (United States Department of State, 2021). These recommendations target the macro, mezzo, and micro issues hindering refugees’ access to self-sufficient programming.



Strengthen infrastructure to welcome more refugees



Dedicate more funding to educate and advocate for refugee self-sufficiency and empowerment



Establish a clearer differentiation with funding for federal, state, and NGO entities



Increase staffing across all sectors



Utilize non-profits and community sponsorship



Incorporate refugee feedback in all forms of programming

Strengthen infrastructure to welcome more refugees

Expanding the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) to include more vulnerable populations is the first step. The current Administration has indicated that it intends to focus on Central Americans, Afghans at risk due to their affiliation with the United States, refugees with various sexual orientations, and Uyghur, Hong Kong, and Burmese Rohingya refugees (United States Department of State, 2021). It is important to ensure that the United States is in fact holding up its commitment to these groups and is held accountable. Additionally, there is more than enough funding for the United States to maintain the current refugee admissions ceiling, including all individuals for apply to become refugees under any of the four USRAP processing priorities.

Dedicate more funding to educate and advocate for refugee self-sufficiency and empowerment

Increasing funding for education and advocacy on refugee matters is essential, as this area of policy is severely under-researched. One study attempting to assess whether interventions in fact improved the economic self-sufficiency and well-being of resettled refugees examined labor participation rates, employment rates, use of cash assistance, income, job retention, and quality of life. The results indicated that there is a vast knowledge gap regarding evidence that is for or against the success of the government interventions that currently exist to improve the economic status of refugees (Ott & Montgomery, 2015). Systematic reviews aiming to evaluate interventions designed to support refugees are necessary for the United States to effectively and efficiently use allocated funding. Operating federal departments without an adequate evidence-based approach to every aspect of refugee resettlement programming is simply a waste of time, money, and energy.

Establish a clearer differentiation with funding for federal, state, and NGO entities

The budget allocated to the Office of Refugee Resettlement should invest funds in developing and implementing programming on the federal, state, and local levels. Also, a more transparent way of funding is important for the public and broader refugee population to be aware of. The narrative around refugee services provided from any entity should be viewed as an investment, not as a way refugees come to the United States and “freeload.” Understanding how money is utilized in each area sets the stage for greater collective impact.

Increase staffing across all sectors

Increasingly delayed processing times, unfortunately, leave families seeking refuge stranded for weeks or months at a time in dangerous conditions. Departments experience understaffing and burnout across the federal and state level, as well as in NGOs. Many technological aspects of processing and case management systems have still not been updated, which adds to longer wait times too. Refugee 'third sector' organizations and resettlement agencies are burdened with the process of merely filling in the gaps, which makes resettled refugees dependent on the efforts of those third sector organizations (Frazier & Van Riemsdijk, 2021). This should not be the case. When an entity is tasked with the responsibility of supporting a vulnerable population, any inconsistencies, or a dip in service, has much larger repercussions and adds an additional layer of disruption to their lives which is not to be taken lightly.

Utilize non-profits and community sponsorship

Non-profits are a central part in facilitating programming on the mezzo level. They have a much deeper connection and understanding of specific populations, and case speak better to their needs. Federal agencies should consult, and not assign or give funding without developing a better understanding of community needs.

Incorporate refugee feedback in all forms of programming

Programming should be designed intentionally with feedback from various refugee communities, so refugees do not continue to feel deprived from taking part in their own financial and social independence. Programming that will benefit refugees is often presented from the viewpoint of agencies, and what they believe to be in the best interest of the refugee population. A study that interviewed nine refugees who now work in resettlement provided a lived experience perspective on the successes and failures of refugee resettlement in the United States (Bernadin, 2019). The participants said that programming should provide more than one way to achieve self-sufficiency, "which would allow refugees different avenues to preserve their prior career, thus part of their identity; feel that they contribute to their new home from inception; as well as begin the process of integration" (Bernadin, 2019). Also, they advocate for more programming around mental health, as the trauma of migration has negative long-lasting effects (Bernadin, 2019). Lastly, they suggest that all program policies should incorporate refugee feedback (Bernadin, 2019). Federal funding should allocate resources to develop more comprehensive, culturally sensitive programming and engage refugee input.

In sum, while the increasingly tumultuous political climate thwarts many efforts into operating under temporary assistance services, staying dedicated to empowering refugees already resettled with long-term solutions and continued support in the United States matters and should always be viewed as a top priority.

"Me and my brothers- we will go to college and graduate and work and our family will work together and will help each other."

- A middle school student

