



# **REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES**

## **AN EXAMINATION OF CHALLENGES AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS**

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**COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS**

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## **GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS**

DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOS	Department of State
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRC	International Rescue Committee
MG	Matching Grant
NGO	Non- Governmental Organization
NSC	National Security Council
OPE	Overseas Processing Entity
ORR	Office of Refugee Resettlement
PRM	Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration
R & P	Reception and Placement
RAP	Refugee Assistance Program
SIPA	Columbia School of International and Public Affairs
TANF	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USCIS	United States Citizenship and Immigration Services
USCRI	United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
USRAP	United States Refugee Admissions Program
Volag	Voluntary Agency

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### *Overview*

Each year the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) offers tens of thousands of refugees who have fled precarious and often life-threatening situations the opportunity to establish a fresh start in the United States. Despite the essential role that USRAP plays in global refugee resettlement, its effectiveness is undermined by the fact that it has not been comprehensively restructured since it was created in 1980. Increasing demographic diversity among the arriving refugee population and a shifting focus toward resettling the most vulnerable has tested the limits of the U.S. resettlement system and has revealed serious problem areas. The need for change to the system is urgent to ensure that refugees resettled to the United States receive the support necessary to begin to sustain themselves in their new home country.

At the request of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a team of graduate students from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) has produced this report, which is based on extensive research and interviews with key figures in refugee resettlement organizations. The aim of the report is to contribute to the current dialogue among refugee agencies and the National Security Council (NSC) surrounding reform of the resettlement system. To that end, this report identifies strengths and challenges of USRAP and proposes recommendations for change to ensure that the program better serves both current and future resettled refugees.

### *Strengths and Challenges Identified*

Prior to discussing the challenges facing USRAP, the report describes strengths of the system in order to identify successful practices that should be bolstered or translated to other areas. This report identifies the partnership between government agencies and non-governmental organizations as a beneficial arrangement for both refugees and resettlement agencies. Additional areas of the system that function well include the plan for immediate reception of refugees, which is largely carried out by voluntary agencies; the provision of language assistance during refugees' first 90 days in the U.S.; and programs such as Matching Grant that have succeeded in assisting refugees achieve self-sufficiency.

The SIPA team has identified several overarching challenges. These challenges fall under the following broad categories: **conflicting policy goals, lack of adequate funding** to all areas of the resettlement system, **obstacles to coordination and planning** between agencies, and the **lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation** of the various components of USRAP. In addition to these program-wide problem areas, the report discusses challenges that correspond to specific phases of the resettlement process. These include **insufficient pre-departure orientation** for admitted refugees during the selection and pre-departure phase, **gaps in information and inconsistent anticipatory planning** during the placement phase, and the **"lottery effect" created by the lack of a uniform set of services provided to refugees** across states and voluntary agencies in the medium to long-term phases of resettlement.

## ***Recommendations***

In order to address these challenges, this report makes the following recommendations:

- Commission a comprehensive analysis of the domestic resettlement system to determine optimal funding levels; the federal government should then increase funding to that level.
- Complete current activities aimed at aligning federal budget requests for the resettlement program with the President's stated admissions ceiling.
- Ensure that information collected overseas is passed on to receiving resettlement agencies.
- Consult refugees to the extent feasible about decisions affecting them.
- Make projections about the needs and resources of receiving communities, and use that information to make proactive decisions about domestic placement.
- Monitor and assess indicators other than employment, such as housing, education, health status, mobility, social connections, and language skills.
- Establish a long-term and comprehensive orientation program that takes place while refugees accepted for resettlement to the U.S. await departure.
- Implement existing policy to allow for secondary migration without loss of services.
- Bolster the Matching Grant Program so that it serves more of the incoming refugee population.
- Expand employment services to match the diverse needs of resettled populations such as recertification, job-specific employment training and extended language training.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since World War II the United States has been a leader among nations that accept refugees for resettlement. In 2008 the United States took in nearly 70% of the world's refugee population to be resettled, a number which reached approximately 60,190.<sup>1</sup> Refugees come to the United States from all corners of the earth, bringing with them drastically different cultural and circumstantial backgrounds, traumatic histories, strengths and needs. This is exemplified by the diverse circumstances of the three largest groups currently accepted for resettlement: Bhutanese, Burmese and Iraqis.

However, while the demographics of resettled refugees have become increasingly complex over the years, resettlement policy has not been comprehensively amended since it was officially codified in 1980.<sup>2</sup> At this time the U.S. was still largely focused on resettling Indochinese refugees after the fall of Vietnam. Furthermore, the current economic crisis has created a particularly difficult environment for incoming refugees, and more and more refugees have become impoverished within a short period of their arrival.<sup>3</sup>

The National Security Council (NSC) is presently leading an ongoing dialogue on how to reform the U.S. refugee resettlement system. The dialogue includes academics, state government officials, policymakers and agencies working within the field of refugee resettlement. Such parties have acknowledged that the current system for refugee resettlement, the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), needs to be reassessed given the nature of refugee resettlement today and the variety of challenges that have surfaced over time. This report aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue led by the NSC. It elaborates the strengths and challenges of the current system and provides recommendations that would reinforce USRAP's goal that resettled refugees become self sufficient and integrated into their local communities. A team of graduate students at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) conducted the study with the guidance of the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The team has training and experience in migration policy analysis, program evaluation, public management, mental health, workforce development and international and immigration law. Two of the students are trained social workers, and four have professional experience working with refugees including one who was a case manager for a local volag affiliate.

Given the SIPA team's limited timeframe, financial resources and institutional access, this report is necessarily broad and, while the recommendations it makes are comprehensive, it offers limited guidance for their implementation. Despite these limitations, the report offers a holistic perspective that is missing in the current literature. It is organized as follows: overview of USRAP, followed by a discussion of the strengths of the current program, identified challenges, and recommendations for improvement.

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<sup>1</sup> USCRI, Resettlement by Country (2009) in World Refugee Survey database: <http://www.refugees.org/article.aspx?id=2370> (accessed February 25, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> History, *Office of Refugee Resettlement*, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/about/history.htm> (accessed March 2, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Georgetown Law and The Human Rights Institute. *Refugee Crisis in America: Iraqis and their Resettlement Experience*. Fact-Finding, (Human Rights Action, 2009).

## ***Overview of USRAP***

The legislative basis for much of the current U.S. resettlement model lies in the Refugee Act of 1980.<sup>4</sup> This act formally established the Federal Refugee Resettlement System including the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and outlined considerations and requirements for the administration of refugee service programs.<sup>5</sup> The text of the Refugee Act clearly articulates the goals of the resettlement program as both “to provide for the effective resettlement of refugees and to assist them to achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible.”<sup>6</sup> Additionally, ORR’s stated aim is to help refugees become “integrated members of American society.”<sup>7</sup> Several agencies, both governmental and non-governmental, are responsible for carrying out the mandate of USRAP:

- The United States Department of Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) orchestrate overseas adjudication of all refugees referred to USRAP by UNHCR, a U.S. Embassy, or NGO.<sup>8</sup> This process includes interviews between field agents and refugees as well as extensive background and security screening, which the FBI, CIA, and State Department carry out.<sup>9</sup> USCIS and DHS also play a key role in the adjustment of immigration status and naturalization of refugees later in the resettlement process.<sup>10</sup>
- The Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) in the Department of State (DOS) is responsible for the establishment of refugee admissions policy and the provision of initial assistance to admitted refugees both overseas and immediately after arrival to the U.S.<sup>11</sup> This assistance includes the Reception and Placement (R & P) program that provides financial support during refugees’ first 30 days in the U.S.<sup>12</sup>
- The Office of Refugee Resettlement in the DHHS is responsible for overseeing the comprehensive services provided to resettled refugees after arrival. ORR funds the

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<sup>4</sup> United States Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Refugee Act of 1980*, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/policy/refact1.htm> (accessed March 5, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> The Refugee Act of 1980 (1980). INA §411.1.

<sup>7</sup> Office of Refugee Resettlement. *Report to Congress FY 2007*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007, 1.

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR Washington, “US Resettlement Overview.” 2008.

<sup>9</sup> The IRC Commission on Iraqi Refugees, “Iraqi Refugees in the United States: In Dire Straits.” (June 2009).

<sup>10</sup> UNHCR Washington, “US Resettlement Overview.” 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Day, PRM, Presentation at the Minnesota Refugee Health Conference (November 5, 2008).



Refugee Assistance Program (RAP), which provides medical and cash assistance to refugees during their first eight months after arrival, as well as the Matching Grant Program (MG), which will be described in greater detail in the next section.<sup>13</sup> ORR also provides funding for the establishment of language and employment training programs.<sup>14</sup>

- Volags are largely non-governmental, private organizations contracted by the federal government to provide immediate assistance to newly-arrived refugees.<sup>15</sup> This assistance ranges from the provision and coordination of reception and placement services immediately upon arrival to longer term resettlement services.
- Each state government also has its own State Refugee Coordinator whose function is to oversee the provision of services to refugees resettled in that state.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> UNHCR Washington, “US Resettlement Overview.” 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> UNHCR Washington, “US Resettlement Overview.” 2008.

<sup>16</sup> “Iraqi Refugees in the United States: In Dire Straits,” 3; Confidential interview with senior-level refugee official, February 26, 2010.

## II. STRENGTHS OF THE CURRENT U.S. SYSTEM

Prior to embarking on a discussion of the challenges facing the current U.S. resettlement system it is important to examine elements of the program that are functioning well. This section will discuss strengths of the current system, both to acknowledge areas of success, and to identify facets of the program that may be expanded upon or translated to other areas in an improved resettlement model.

### *Number of Refugees Resettled*

The importance of USRAP in the context of the international system of refugee resettlement lies not only in its humanitarian function, but also in the sheer number of refugees that the United States accepts for resettlement. Through USRAP the United States admits more refugees for resettlement than all other nations combined.<sup>17</sup> In 2008 alone, USRAP resettled approximately 60,190 of the 86,460 refugees accepted worldwide.<sup>18</sup> Although the U.S. system accepts lower ratios of refugees per capita than other resettlement countries such as Australia, Canada and Sweden, the significance of the contribution of the U.S. program to the international resettlement system is clear.<sup>19</sup>

### *Reception*

The U.S. system functions well in its immediate reception plan according to international standards compiled by the UNHCR.<sup>20</sup> Volags and the IOM coordinate to arrange for refugees to be greeted at the airport and provided with immediate orientation. Prior to the refugees' arrival, volag staff secure housing and outfit homes with basic necessities.<sup>21</sup> This pre-arrival preparation

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<sup>17</sup> World Refugee Survey 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Fiscal Year 2008 Arrivals, in *ORR database*, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/data/fy2008RA.htm> (accessed on March 10, 2010); World Refugee Survey 2009.

<sup>19</sup> World Refugee Survey 2009.

<sup>20</sup> UNHCR. *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook to Guide Reception and Integration*. (2002).

<sup>21</sup> Personal interview with IRC staff members, New York, NY, February 1, 2010; PRM. (n.d.) "17 things you need to know about resettling in the United States".

enables refugees to begin the process of settling into their new homes as soon as possible. Caseworkers employed by volags also schedule the array of appointments with social service agencies that individual refugees must attend after their arrival.

The fact that government agencies partner with volags to carry out the provision of services to refugees is an additional strength of the current U.S. resettlement system.<sup>22</sup> One illustration of this arrangement is RAP, which provides temporary cash and medical aid to refugees.<sup>23</sup> While ORR provides funds for the program, state agencies, and in many cases volags, are responsible for its administration.<sup>24</sup> The advantage of this arrangement is twofold. First, volags have greater flexibility than government agencies in determining how funds should be disbursed to newly arrived refugees. Second, these organizations typically have first-hand knowledge of the circumstances of individual refugee clients and for this reason are better able to understand and address their immediate needs.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Post- Arrival Language Assistance***

While there is room for expansion, an additional strength of the U.S. system is its incorporation of language assistance in the immediate post-arrival period for newly resettled refugees.<sup>26</sup> Funding agreements between volags and federal government agencies require the provision of assistance in refugees' own languages for the first 90 days, which is achieved through the use of bilingual staff or centralized interpreter services.<sup>27</sup> For many new arrivals, coming to the United States is an entry into a completely unfamiliar cultural, geographical, linguistic, and social territory. Prior to resettling, many refugees have little experience with written or spoken English.<sup>28</sup> This provision fosters communication and facilitates access to and understanding of needed services.<sup>29</sup> Each of these functions plays a key role in refugees' immediate resettlement experience.

### ***Matching Grant Program***

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<sup>22</sup> UNHCR, *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook*.

<sup>23</sup> Refugee Assistance Program Overview, Michigan Department of Human Services, [http://www.michigan.gov/dhs/0,1607,7-124-5453\\_5526-15492--,00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/dhs/0,1607,7-124-5453_5526-15492--,00.html) (accessed on April 16, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Cash and Medical Assistance, *Office of Refugee Resettlement*, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/benefits/cma.htm> (accessed on March 10, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> UNHCR, *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook*.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Farrell, Mary, Bret Barden and Mike Mueller. *The Evaluation of the Refugee Social Service (RSS) and Targeted Assistance Formula Grant (TAG) Programs: Synthesis of Findings from Three Sites*. (Falls Church, VA: The Lewin Group, 2008); Women's Refugee Commission. "Life in the Promised Land: Resettled Refugee Youth Struggle in the U.S." (Phoenix, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Several key players in the field of resettlement have lauded the success of the Matching Grant (MG) Program and have identified it as a facet of the system worthy of expansion.<sup>30</sup> Initially established in 1979 to provide assistance to Soviet and other non-Southeast Asian refugees in the U.S., MG now finds its legislative authority formally vested in the Refugee Act.<sup>31</sup> The goal of MG is to achieve economic self-sufficiency for employable refugees within four to six months after their arrival to the United States.<sup>32</sup> ORR defines economic self-sufficiency as “earning a total family income at a level that enables a family unit to support itself without receipt of a cash assistance grant.”<sup>33</sup> Under MG, ORR provides funds to volags that are able to match them with their own resources. Participating volags must also be capable of coordinating multilingual employment services, which include establishing connections between program participants and employers.<sup>34</sup> In 2008 MG helped 80% of MG participants to secure economic self-sufficiency as defined by ORR.<sup>35</sup>

To illustrate the size and scope of MG, in 2008 ORR provided a total of \$60,000,000 in funding for 27,272 slots. Nine volags administer MG through a network of approximately 230 offices in 43 states.<sup>36</sup> A study done by ORR in FY 2001 found that more than 40% of resettled refugees for whom the program is available, including Cuban/Haitian parolees who have been allowed into the program despite the lack of an R&P grant, participate in the program.<sup>37</sup> Praise for MG largely centers on its job placement rate within 120 to 180 days, which has remained considerably high during the economic downturn.<sup>38</sup> While this program is constrained by several challenges, which will be discussed in the following section, the successes of this program warrant its consideration as a model for other programs or simply for expansion.

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<sup>30</sup> Confidential interviews with senior-level refugee resettlement officials, February 26, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> The History of the Matching Grant Program, *Office of Refugee Resettlement*, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/matchgh.htm> (accessed on March 8, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> DHHS, Code of Federal Regulations - Title 45: Public Welfare, December 2005, <http://cfr.vlex.com/source/code-federal-regulations-public-welfare-1094> (accessed on March 5, 2010); ORR State Letter #07-08 (April 4, 2007), <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/policy/sl07-08.htm> (accessed on March 5, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> History of the Matching Grant Program.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> History of the Matching Grant Program..

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Confidential interview with senior-level refugee resettlement official, February 26, 2010.

### III. CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

Along with the concrete strengths outlined above, the American resettlement model has key, identifiable challenges. Some are pervasive throughout the resettlement and integration process while others are unique to a particular phase of the process.<sup>39</sup> This section first highlights the overarching challenges. It then examines each phase of the resettlement model, both to identify specific issues and how the overarching challenges manifest.

#### *Overarching issues*

**Conflicting policy goals.** While there are many agencies at play in the resettlement process, the bulk of the U.S. resettlement program is divided between two major policy players with very different perspectives on their work: PRM and ORR. Recently, PRM re-visited the purpose of USRAP and decided that beyond serving a basic foreign policy function, it is also a

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<sup>39</sup> “Phase” refers to each stage of the refugee resettlement process. For the purposes of this report, the first phase is selection/ pre-departure, followed by reception and placement, resettlement, and long-term integration.

demonstration of “America’s compassion for some of the world’s most vulnerable people.”<sup>40</sup> Recently, the U.S. admitted people of 60 different nationalities and is processing refugees in more than 40 sites. According to PRM testimony to the U.S. Senate, “the program is more geographically diverse and operationally complicated than ever before. ...the program is subject to many unanticipated logistical complications and political challenges.”<sup>41</sup>

While PRM, as a subsidiary of DOS, makes decisions about the program from a foreign policy perspective, ORR, as part of DHHS, sees it as a domestic social services issue. In a recent interview, the president of one volag questioned whether PRM’s focus on resettling the most vulnerable and on bringing in diverse groups of refugees was practical from a domestic perspective, especially given the expectation that refugees who are not on Matching Grant will transfer to general public assistance once the R&P period is over.<sup>42</sup> In site visits around the country, PRM’s Assistant Secretary of State “observed weak linkages between the State Department’s initial Reception and Placement Program and the longer-term services to refugees provided by the Department of Health and Human Services.”<sup>43</sup>

It is widely acknowledged that the size and composition of the refugee community the U.S. admits is a largely political decision. *Non refoulement* is the only hard and fast obligation derived from the U.S.’s treaty obligations and its domestic policy with respect to the admission or the acceptance of refugees for resettlement.<sup>44</sup> The composition of a given resettlement community often reflects the priorities of the government’s current foreign policy objectives, which do not always align with who is in the most urgent need of protection. Tellingly, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the number of refugees admitted to the U.S. dropped to historically low levels.<sup>45</sup>

**Inadequate funding.** There is a clear understanding that all phases of the program are underfunded. A “growing imbalance between federal resources and expectations” is an especially salient result of the disconnect between the foreign policy aims and the domestic realities.<sup>46</sup> PRM

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<sup>40</sup> Kelly Ryan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of BPRM of DOS, Testimony before the Senate Special Committee on Aging Hearing on Health and Welfare Needs of Elderly Refugees and Asylees (Dec 5, 2007), <http://aging.senate.gov/events/hr184kr.pdf> (accessed on March 11, 2010); Confidential interview with senior-level refugee resettlement official, February 26, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Kelly Ryan, Testimony before the Senate Special Committee , 4.

<sup>42</sup> Confidential interview with senior-level refugee resettlement official, February 26, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Schwartz, E, Assistant Secretary of State. Letter to Lavinia Limón, President, USCRI, January 22, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> United Nations, Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. New York 31 January 1967. Non refoulement means that no refugee may be sent back to a country where they will be in danger.

<sup>45</sup> Refugee Arrival Data, in ORR database, [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/data/refugee\\_arrival\\_data.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/data/refugee_arrival_data.htm) (accessed on March 3, 2010).

<sup>46</sup> Refugee Council USA. “US Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Program at a Crossroads: Recommendations by Refugee Council USA”

currently resettles refugees from a highly diverse range of ethnicities and nationalities, as well as resettling the most vulnerable.<sup>47</sup> This emphasis calls for a depth and variety of services that ORR and the volags cannot provide at current levels of federal funding.<sup>48</sup> Local agencies are expected to fill these funding gaps.<sup>49</sup> Although volags faced the same difficult fundraising climate as other nonprofits in the recession, stimulus money was not put into refugee programs.<sup>50</sup>

An issue related to the discrepancy between stated admissions ceilings and the actual number of refugees admitted to the U.S. is that the President establishes resettlement ceilings seven to eight months before proposing a fiscal year budget to Congress. Moreover, the budget document does not link the amount requested to any stated ceiling level. Since 2005, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has been working with DOS, the NSC, and other governmental agencies to better align federal budget requests for the program with the refugee admissions ceilings. Currently, the plan item is listed as "action taken, but not completed."<sup>51</sup> Completion of this action would be essential to ensure that the President states admissions ceilings that are realistic, so that the system is able to meet its designated goals.

**Coordination and planning.** Gaps in coordination and insufficient anticipatory planning at every stage of the resettlement process weaken the system's ability to prepare refugees and receiving communities for resettlement. PRM and ORR largely do not engage in proactive planning or budgeting, which impacts both volags' ability to do so as well as their funding.<sup>52</sup>

While OPEs provide quarterly arrival projections to PRM, this information is not shared with ORR or the volags for purposes of capacity setting at the local level.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the level at which ORR will fund volags and other social service programs is dictated by the number of refugee arrivals from previous years, rather than accounting for current refugee flows and anticipated increases. Local volag programs often find themselves with insufficient funding to serve the number of refugees they have in their caseload.<sup>54</sup>

Another symptom of insufficient anticipatory planning is the fact that USRAP consistently falls short of meeting the resettlement ceilings that the President establishes, despite the overwhelming number of refugees waiting to be resettled. In 2006, 2007 and 2008, the

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<sup>47</sup> Refugee Crisis in America.

<sup>48</sup> Confidential interview with senior-level refugee resettlement official, February 26, 2010.

<sup>49</sup> Refugee Council USA, US Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Program at a Crossroads.

<sup>50</sup> Confidential interview with senior-level refugee resettlement official, February 26, 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Department of State, "Refugee Admissions to the US Assessment," <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/expectmore/detail/10000394.2004.html> (accessed on February 27, 2010).

<sup>52</sup> Refugee Crisis in America.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Refugee Crisis in America.

number of resettled refugees reached 69%, 97%, and 86% of the ceiling respectively.<sup>55</sup> Budgeting, political and situational considerations play a role in keeping numbers down; however, federal agencies appear not to sufficiently factor in such considerations when planning for the year.<sup>56</sup>

**Lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation.** No stakeholder is responsible for holistic monitoring and evaluation of practices or outcomes for refugees or communities, especially over the medium and long-term, making evidenced-based policy and program decisions difficult.<sup>57</sup> There are very few recent studies of ORR programs.<sup>58</sup> Data collection is mostly confined to short-term outcomes related to economic self-sufficiency determined by ORR contracts such as employment level at 120 to 180 days. ORR staff acknowledged that refugees' employment status at these markers is not necessarily predictive of their long-term economic stability and prosperity.<sup>59</sup> Two ORR-commissioned reports called for improved program assessment and evaluation, one of which recommended examining outcomes multiple years past arrival.<sup>60</sup>

Although the Department of State as well as individual volags audit agency files as a quality-control measure, data is not regularly analyzed for differential outcomes for different refugee populations or for community-level impacts.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the audits are used as basis for corrective action against agencies, encouraging a focus on paperwork rather than service delivery.<sup>62</sup> Integration, one of the stated goals of USRAP, is not clearly operationalized or systematically tracked.

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<sup>55</sup> Department of State, "Refugee Admissions to the US Assessment."

<sup>56</sup> Personal interview with Robert Carey, Vice President, Resettlement and Migration Policy, IRC, April 12, 2001; Confidential interview with senior-level refugee resettlement official, February 26, 2010.

<sup>57</sup> Innes, Judith E., "Knowledge and Public Policy: The Search for Meaningful Indicators" 2nd Expanded Edition, 293-295. (Transaction Publishers, 1990); Nightingale, Demestra Smith. *A Framework for Continuous Evaluation of Office of Refugee Resettlement Formula Program Supporting Employability Services*. (Baltimore: The Lewin Group, 2008); Personal interview with IRC Staff members, New York, NY. February 1, 2010.

<sup>58</sup> Halpern, Peggy. "Refugee Economic Self-Sufficiency: An Exploratory Study of Approaches Used in Office of Refugee Resettlement Programs." Washington, DC, DHHS, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, (2008).

<sup>59</sup> Confidential interview with senior-level refugee official, February 26, 2010.

<sup>60</sup> Nightingale. *Framework for Continuous Evaluation*; Farrell, Barden and Mueller, *Evaluation of Refugee Social Service*.

<sup>61</sup> Personal communications with a former resettlement caseworker, February 5, 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid; *Refugee Admissions to the US*; Brown, T. L., Potoski, M., Van Slyke, D. M. Managing public service contracts: Aligning values, institutions and markets. *Public Administration Review*, 66(3), 323-331, (2006).



The responsibility for filling the monitoring and evaluation gaps necessarily rests at the federal level; volags work within contractual responsibilities from funders. Given the difficult funding environment, they are hard pressed to collect data beyond what they are contractually obligated to do.<sup>63</sup> It is notable here that refugees are not consulted about the monitoring and evaluation that does occur.<sup>64</sup>

### ***Pre-departure Orientation***

Both refugees who have gone through the resettlement process and resettlement officials in the United States have identified pre-departure orientation as an area of much needed improvement.<sup>65</sup> Challenges identified within the orientation process include that the volume and content of information provided to refugees is highly variable, overwhelming, and is often forgotten before arrival. In addition, individuals who have never been to the U.S. often provide orientation information, despite having little knowledge of the resettlement experience or of potential barriers to self-sufficiency. Pre-departure orientation is an important component of the resettlement process both as a means of preparing individuals for entry into unfamiliar territory, but also for the management of expectations of what refugee experiences will be post-arrival.<sup>66</sup>

### ***Placement***

Where refugees are placed in the United States is one of the most critical elements in determining their chances of thriving and becoming self-sufficient in their new communities. Ideally, a proactive system would be in place for federal agencies and volags to “match” refugees and receiving communities. Unfortunately, the current placement model relies on retroactive information and “important opportunities for planning and coordination are missed or ignored,” with consequences for the receiving agencies and the refugees.<sup>67</sup>

**Gaps in information sharing** between federal and local service agencies also limit volags’ ability to make placement decisions appropriate for individual refugees. The Refugee Act states that representatives of volags should meet at least quarterly with representatives of State and local governments and must take into account each of the following: availability of employment opportunities, affordable housing, public and private resources (including education, health care, and mental services) for refugees in the area, the likelihood of refugees

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<sup>63</sup> Personal interview with IRC Staff members, New York. February 1, 2010; Confidential interviews with senior-level refugee officials, February 26, 2010.

<sup>64</sup> Confidential interviews with refugee resettlement officials, February 26, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> “Iraqi Refugees in the United States: In Dire Straits”; Women’s Refugee Commission. “Life in the Promised Land; Confidential interview with senior-level refugee resettlement official, February 26, 2010.

<sup>66</sup> Confidential interview with senior-level refugee resettlement official, (February 26, 2010); UNHCR, *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook*.

<sup>67</sup> US Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Program at a Crossroads; UNHCR, *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook*, 33.

placed in the area becoming self-sufficient and free from long term dependence on public assistance, and the fact that secondary migration of refugees to and from the area is likely to occur.<sup>68</sup> Beyond the law, accepted best practices for placement decisions include considering available jobs, necessary services, and ideally the presence of a receptive receiving community as well as an established ethnic connection.<sup>69</sup> However, while local volag agencies have such knowledge about the communities in which they work and seek to match refugees based on known criteria, information about receiving communities is not formally incorporated into placement decisions.<sup>70</sup>

Additionally, OPEs and PRM pass on only limited information to the volags about who will be placed with them.<sup>71</sup> So while the most vulnerable populations are targeted for resettlement, “the extent that vulnerabilities are captured as part of the adjudication process, they are not communicated to volags to ensure quality post-settlement services.”<sup>72</sup> DHS contracts with OPEs, primarily IOM, to conduct interviews and medical exams, but OPEs collect medical information for the purpose of determining admissibility, and not to assess refugee health and mental health needs, and sometimes do not collect it in time for it to be transferred before volags make placement decisions.<sup>73</sup> As a particularly serious result, refugees arrive with unanticipated medical issues.<sup>74</sup>

### ***Medium and Long Term Services and Support***

In addition to the placement-related challenges outlined above, the notion that every refugee needs the same baseline services that has persisted since the inception of the refugee program aligns poorly with the goals of self-sufficiency and integration in the medium and long term.<sup>75</sup> This is especially true given the diversity of the refugees arriving to the U.S. and the diversity of circumstances they face once here. Refugees have little agency over what services they can access, and even volags have minimal room to account for refugees’ individual profiles

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<sup>68</sup> INA §411.2(C)(ii-iii)(II-IV)

<sup>69</sup> UNHCR, *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook*; Refugee Crisis in America.

<sup>70</sup> Confidential interview with senior-level refugee resettlement official, February 26, 2010.

<sup>71</sup> UNHCR, *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook*; DOS, DHS, HHS. “Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2010.” Report to the Congress, 2009; Barbara Day, PRM, Presentation at the Minnesota Refugee Health Conference (November 5, 2008); *Refugee Crisis in America*; Refugee Council USA, US Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Program at a Crossroads.

<sup>72</sup> *Refugee Crisis in America*, 39.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Confidential interview with senior-level refugee resettlement official, February 26, 2010.

<sup>75</sup> Schiller, Nina G, JerriAnne Boggis, Molly Messenger, and Emily M Douglas. *Refugee Resettlement in New Hampshire: Pathways and Barriers to Building Community*. (Durham: University of New Hampshire, 2009).

when deciding what services to offer.<sup>76</sup> Instead, as outlined below, quick placement in employment is emphasized across the board, access to supplementary services and community support is determined essentially by lottery, and secondary migration is not accounted for.

**Focus on quick employment.** In the current policy environment, employment is considered the primary indicator of refugee integration and self-sufficiency.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, volags have extremely short timeframes within which to provide services to refugees linked to government funds. For example, a high percentage of refugees participating in MG must have a job within four to six months in order for the volag to receive future match funds. In this context, the job-first focus requires volags to get employable refugees in a job as quickly as possible. As a result, refugees lack time to become acclimated to their new surroundings and consequently find themselves in jobs that are inappropriate for their skill set, and often do not have access to the supportive services that could improve their long-term outcomes. In addition, the focus on resettling the most vulnerable means that today's refugees especially "face unique medical needs that do not go away when they are able to support themselves."<sup>78</sup> The effects of trauma, loss, and injury are long-lasting, and play an important role in the ability of individuals to adjust to and thrive in an unfamiliar and challenging environment.<sup>79</sup>

The challenges facing refugees in seeking rapid employment are compounded by the fact that scarce resources are channeled to meet immediate needs to the detriment of recertification and training.<sup>80</sup> While the Refugee Act recognizes that "professional refresher training and other recertification services" are necessary to attain jobs in line with a refugee's skill set, limited funding means training provision typically stops at English language training during the early resettlement period.<sup>81</sup> This disempowers highly skilled refugees and deprives their new communities of valuable human capital.<sup>82</sup> A former resettlement caseworker cites many examples of this phenomenon including medical doctors working as cashiers and professors working as wait staff.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Confidential interviews with senior-level refugee resettlement officials, February 26, 2010; *Refugee Crisis in America*.

<sup>77</sup> Farrell, Barden and Mueller. *Evaluation of Refugee Social Service*; Halpern, Peggy. "Refugee Economic Self-Sufficiency"; Schiller, Boggis, Messenger, and Douglas. *Refugee Resettlement in New Hampshire*.

<sup>78</sup> *Refugee Crisis in America*, 29.

<sup>79</sup> UNHCR, *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook*.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*; Farrell, Barden and Mueller. *Evaluation of the Refugee Social Service*; Halpern, Peggy. "Refugee Economic Self-Sufficiency"; Schiller, Boggis, Messenger, and Douglas. *Refugee Resettlement in New Hampshire*.

<sup>81</sup> UNHCR, *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook*.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>83</sup> Personal communications with former resettlement caseworker, February 5, 2010.

**Lottery effect.** The medium- and long-term services available to refugees vary drastically depending on which volag is responsible for their resettlement and on which state or city they are placed in. Together with the sometimes ineffective placement decisions outlined above, this variation creates a “lottery effect” for refugees.<sup>84</sup> Some volags have a competitive edge when applying for grant money which means some agencies have the ability to provide specialized services for “vulnerable populations” such as single mothers, children, the elderly, and people with emotional trauma or mental illnesses, while some do not.<sup>85</sup>

Lack of transportation is an example of an unevenly-met need that adversely affects long-term self-sufficiency and highlights the lottery effect.<sup>86</sup> Effective public transportation in the U.S. is primarily centered in a few major metropolitan areas, yet refugees are increasingly being resettled—and secondarily migrating—to smaller cities and suburban settings.<sup>87</sup> Lack of access to transportation in these environments creates the fundamental challenge of getting to job interviews in the near-term, and getting to work consistently in the long-term if a job can be secured.<sup>88</sup> There are creative and effective solutions to this challenge. In Florida, an agency provides loans for refugees to purchase basic automobiles. In Maryland, a large company that employs refugees provides low-cost transportation for their workers. Vermont provides additional financial and language assistance so that refugees may obtain a driver’s license.<sup>89</sup> However, these solutions constitute the exception and not the rule.

An additional contributor to the lottery effect is the current practice of transferring refugees onto general public assistance after their refugee aid has expired. Each state implements major assistance programs like Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), Supplementary Nutrition Assistance (food stamps) and Children’s Health Insurance Program through different mechanisms and at different levels of support.<sup>90</sup> The result of this arrangement is that within only four months of arrival to the U.S., refugees who share similar characteristics, but that are resettled in different states may receive an entirely different package of benefits. Inevitably those

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<sup>84</sup> Personal interview with IRC Staff members, New York, NY. February 1, 2010.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with IRC Staff members, New York, NY. February 1, 2010; *Refugee Crisis in America*.

<sup>86</sup> *Refugee Crisis in America*, 20; Schiller, Boggis, Messenger, and Douglas. *Refugee Resettlement in New Hampshire*.

<sup>87</sup> Confidential interview with senior-level refugee resettlement official, (February 26, 2010); Schiller, Boggis, Messenger, and Douglas. *Refugee Resettlement in New Hampshire*.

<sup>88</sup> UNHCR, *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook*.

<sup>89</sup> UNHCR, *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook*.

<sup>90</sup> Boots, S. W. Improving access to public benefits: Helping eligible individuals and families get the income supports they need. (Ford Foundation, Open Society Institute and Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010).

individuals and families who are fortunate enough to be resettled in states with generous social welfare programs end up better off than those in states that offer less assistance.<sup>91</sup>

Another example of the lottery effect is the varying engagement of the receiving community. Involving established refugee populations in the reception of new arrivals provides social support and facilitates community participation of newly resettled refugees.<sup>92</sup> Refugee communities can assist the integration process through formal volag channels or informally in social and faith-based environments. Some refugees may be quicker to trust their fellow community members than their case managers.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, these networks can offer ongoing language learning and advice on community resources both during volag case management and long after case management has ended.<sup>94</sup> Currently, there are varying systems for engaging existing communities in the integration of newly resettled refugees, but no formalized national mechanisms exist.<sup>95</sup>

**Secondary migration.** Subsequent to their initial placement, many refugees move to areas that they believe will suit them better for reasons including the presence of a community of fellow country-of-origin nationals or increased access to public assistance.<sup>96</sup> Although the Refugee Act recognizes this process of “secondary migration” as a natural and expected phenomenon, it does not provide the necessary tools and resources to manage or respond to it.<sup>97</sup> The money allocated to volags by the federal government to cover the initial resettlement period does not follow the refugee upon secondary migration. Therefore, new receiving communities are often burdened with the cost of providing services for refugees who came through secondary migration without receiving adequate funds from the state to cover these additional costs.

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<sup>91</sup> Personal interview with IRC staff members, New York, NY February 1, 2010; Schiller, Boggis, Messenger, and Douglas. *Refugee Resettlement in New Hampshire*.

<sup>92</sup> UNHCR, *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook*.

<sup>93</sup> Confidential interview with senior-level refugee official, February 26, 2010.

<sup>94</sup> UNHCR, *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook*; Confidential interviews with senior-level refugee officials, February 26, 2010.

<sup>95</sup> Schiller, Boggis, Messenger, and Douglas. *Refugee Resettlement in New Hampshire*.

<sup>96</sup> Personal interview with Ellen Percy Kraly, President, Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees and Professor, Department of Geography, Colgate University, April 7, 2010.

<sup>97</sup> Confidential interviews with senior-level refugee officials, February 26, 2010.

## IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

The breadth of challenges facing the current U.S. resettlement system makes it imperative to strengthen problem areas as well as to maintain and, when possible, bolster elements of the system that function well. Components of the system that are effective such as the initial reception of refugees, provision of language assistance, and successful programs such as MG, are essential components of the current system and worthy of expansion in a redesigned resettlement model. Further recommendations below primarily concern macro, system-wide steps to address challenges. Stakeholders within the resettlement system are best equipped to speak to implementation and micro-level subtleties of each.

As is the case with many political issues, refugee policy often reflects the political priorities of an administration and is done in an ad-hoc rather than a comprehensive and strategic fashion. While the authors recognize this reality, this report seeks to pose recommendations that go beyond the politics of the moment. Policy makers in collaboration with refugee agencies can capitalize on the fact that they need not draft new legislation to affect change. The text of the Refugee Act states that the Director of ORR has the authority over “policies and strategies for the placement and resettlement of refugees within the U.S.”<sup>98</sup> As such, components of programs may be altered at any time by the Director in consultation with DOS. In fact, the legislation mandates that the Director make periodic assessments of the current system in order to address failings in the policy.

### *Budget Allocation*

1. **The federal agencies should commission a comprehensive study of the domestic resettlement system to determine optimal funding levels including provisions for recommendations contained here; the federal government should increase funding to that level.** The model for such a study could be the study undertaken for the overseas component of resettlement in 2005.<sup>99</sup> Given the reactive way in which the resettlement system developed, no such analysis has ever been done on the domestic system. In its absence, stating an optimal funding level would be arbitrary.<sup>100</sup> Once funding levels are adjusted, the system will be able to function at its utmost potential and, ultimately, ensure that all refugees have access to adequate and quality services they need to become self-sufficient and to integrate.
2. **OMB, PRM, and NSC should complete current activities aimed at aligning federal budget requests for the resettlement program with the President’s stated admissions ceiling.** Lack of budgetary capacity plays a role in USRAP consistently falling short of the admissions ceiling. Ensuring that the budget can accommodate the stated ceiling will

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<sup>98</sup> Refugee Act of 1980.

<sup>99</sup> Martin, David. "The US Refugee Program in Transition." *Migration Information Source*. May 2005. <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?id=305> (accessed March 5, 2010).

<sup>100</sup> Personal interview with Robert Carey, April 12, 2010.

help the program reach its full admission potential according to the President's projections.

### ***Federal Agency Responsibilities (Ceiling Issue)***

3. **PRM should consult ORR about the capacity of the domestic service system prior to making decisions about admissions levels and target groups to ORR.** ORR is better positioned to assess the system's capabilities. This will help ensure actual refugee needs are given top priority with foreign policy goals still considered as well.

### ***Information Collected and Shared***

4. **PRM should ensure that resettlement projections collected by OPEs and IOM are passed on to receiving agencies in advance.** ORR, volags and affiliates will then be better able to adjust services and prepare receiving communities for the specific refugee populations arriving. They will also be better able to assess the match between refugee and community.
5. **All agencies should consult refugees at every stage to the extent feasible about decisions affecting them.** One model to replicate is that of Lulea, Sweden, where refugees voice their opinion through immigrant councils. Community leaders attend council meetings and pass along comments and proposals to the executive council.<sup>101</sup> At a minimum, local affiliates could administer surveys during the R&P period when refugees are in constant contact with their caseworkers. Consultation will allow for a more refugee-centric resettlement program with tailored services based on ascertained need. It also restores choice and agency into the resettlement equation.

### ***Proactive Information Collection***

6. **ORR and PRM should ask volags and local agencies to collect and pass on projections about the needs and assets of receiving communities, and should use that information to make proactive decisions about domestic placement and services, in accordance with the Refugee Act.** The law clearly states that representatives of volags should meet not less often than quarterly with representatives of state and local governments to take into account the likelihood of refugees placed in the area becoming self-sufficient and free from long-term dependence on public assistance. Having consistent, accurate information flows between agencies on the ground and federal agencies will allow for better-informed decisions on refugee placement and service allocation.

### ***Outcomes Tracking/Monitoring and Evaluation***

7. **ORR and volags should include assessment of outcomes for refugees beyond employment, such as mobility, housing, education, community ties, health status,**

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<sup>101</sup> UNHCR, Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook.

**social connections, and language skills. They should track outcomes including employment significantly beyond 180 days.** Furthermore, indicators should be adjusted for the disparate group of refugees being resettled, especially the most vulnerable. While employment is an important indicator of self-sufficiency for people capable of working, using indicators that measure community ties, health, social connections and even satisfaction will give agencies a more holistic picture of the outcomes for all refugees. Tracking these indicators past 180 days will lead to a more accurate picture of medium- and long-term outcomes as well as indicate what factors or practices in certain agencies or locations are most effective.<sup>102</sup>

### ***Expansion of pre-departure orientation***

8. **PRM should establish a long-term and comprehensive orientation program run by OPEs that takes place while refugees accepted for resettlement to the U.S. await departure.** Pre-departure orientation can play a critical role in preparing refugees and giving them realistic expectations for their lives once they are resettled. This program should include the provision of extensive information about the communities to which refugees will be relocating, and should incorporate thorough cultural, linguistic, and vocational orientation. Longer orientation will allow information to be distributed at an appropriate pace that gives individuals time to process and retain what they have learned. Thus, they will be able to have a foundational understanding of important information regardless of the context of their unique city of resettlement.
9. **Agencies should create a mechanism through which refugees can access pertinent orientation information both before departure and post arrival on an as-needed basis.** Refugees will thus be able to access information as their questions arise, which will increase their ability to retain it.

### ***Secondary Migration***

10. **ORR should implement existing policy that allows for secondary migration among resettled refugees.** Secondary migration is not an anomaly that was unforeseen in the establishment of the current resettlement model; rather, it was expressly mentioned within the Refugee Act of 1980. The system must be flexible enough to accommodate refugees who exercise their right to mobility without penalizing them by loss of services

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<sup>102</sup> Rubin, A, and E Babbie. *Research Methods for Social Work*. (California: Thomson Brookscote, 2008); Schulte, Bernd. "The Open Method of Coordination as a Political Strategy in the Field of Immigrant Integration Policy." In *Managing Integration: The European Union's Responsibilities Towards Immigrants*, by Rita Sussmuth and Werner Weidenfeld, 114-121. (Gutersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2005); Entzinger, Han, and Renske Biezeveld. "Benchmarking in Immigrant Integration." In *Managing Integration: The European Union's Responsibilities Towards Immigrants*, by Rita Sussmuth and Werner Weidenfeld, 101-113. (Gutersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2005).



or penalizing the service system that absorbs them. While this will require some increase in coordination between state and local agencies in order to allow funds to relocate with refugees, given the possibility that refugees who migrate may travel to locales where they have a stronger network of social support or increased likelihood of finding employment, the benefits of amending the system in terms of improved outcomes likely outweigh the costs.

### ***Meeting Individual Needs and Creating Positive Long-Term Outcomes***

11. **PRM and ORR should bolster Matching Grant so that it serves more of the incoming refugee population.** As MG has been successful in allowing eligible refugees to avoid transferring on to public assistance, this will decrease refugee dependency on social welfare systems such as TANF and narrow the “lottery effect” making services across the country more standardized.
12. **Agencies should adjust services for incoming refugees according to their profiles.** This arrangement would enable refugees to access services that are more tailored to their specific needs and strengths. It would also provide refugee agencies with greater flexibility in their coordination and delivery of these services.
13. **Agencies should restructure and expand employment services to match the diverse needs of resettled populations such as recertification, job-specific employment training and extended language training as needed.** Such services would improve refugees’ chances of long term economic self-sufficiency by building upon their knowledge and skills. This will also promote integration and contribute to the host community in a valuable way.

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