The Spatial Politics of Refugee Resettlement in Burlington, Vermont

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for College Honors in the College of Arts and Sciences in the Department of Geography at the University of Vermont

Date of Submission: April 21, 2016
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Abstract

The United States has received refugees under a formal refugee resettlement system for decades, but in the last fifteen years, local receiving communities have struggled to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse refugee population. These issues have raised a number of moral and practical dilemmas over how to best resettle refugees to promote long-term integration. Through a spatial lens, this thesis broadly examines how the ways in which refugees are resettled at the national level affects local communities using Burlington, Vermont, as a case study. I analyzed meeting notes from local refugee resettlement consultation meetings, conducted semi-structured interviews with local and national stakeholders, and examined quantitative resettlement data to identify how the structure and decision-making of resettlement at the national level impacts the effectiveness of local refugee resettlement programs. By doing so, this project seeks to understand the challenges and obstacles, as well as the successes and best practices, in refugee placement and reception in the U.S.

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List of Acronyms

AALV- Association of Africans Living in Vermont

HHS- Department of Health and Human Services

MAA(s)- Mutual Aid Association

ORR- Office of Refugee Resettlement

PRM- Department of State Bureau on Population, Refugees, and Migration

R&P- Reception and Placement

RISPNet- Refugee and Immigrant Service Provider Network

SRC- State Refugee Coordinator

UNHCR- U.N. High Commissioner on Refugees

USCRI-US Committees on Refugees and Immigrants

USRAP- United States Refugee Admissions Program

VOLAG(s)- Volunteer Agency

VRRP- Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program

WRAPS-Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System

Chapter 1: Introduction and Methodology

The influx of 935,000 refugee and asylum seekers from Syria to Europe in recent years has raised moral, ethical, and political questions over how to best absorb and resettle displaced populations (UNHCR 2016). The United States, in turn, recently announced it would resettle 10,000 Syrians over the next year and raise the total number of refugees (referred as the 'refugee ceiling) to a total of 85,000 for 2016 (Harris et al. 2015). As in Europe, U.S. policy towards refugees raises a number of moral and practical questions about how to properly resettle refugees to promote long-term integration and positive socio-economic outcomes. More broadly, it also raises more fundamental questions about the purpose of the U.S. refugee resettlement program. Is it intended to promote peace, international stability, achieve humanitarian goals, increase international cooperation, or all of the above?

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Comment [1]: You might add here that it indeed raises fundamental questions about what the refugee program is supposed to do – promote peace? international stability? achieve humanitarian goals? Increase international cooperation?

President Obama's proposal to raise the refugee ceiling to accommodate the worsening plight of Syrian refugees was immediately met with backlash from Republican Congressional members, especially in the wake of the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 and San Bernardino attack in California weeks later. The former was carried out by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) operatives, while the San Bernardino perpetrators were inspired by the terrorist organization. In the case of the Paris attacks, one of the perpetrators entered France with a fake Syrian passport after joining the stream of migrants and refugees making their way across Europe overland from seaports in Greece and Italy (Faiola 2015). This unfortunate circumstance immediately lay suspicion on

the refugees as potential terrorists with the ability to easily carry out attacks on American and European soil.

Republican presidential candidates, governors, and mayors from across the US – like their counterparts in many parts of Europe – seized on these terrorist attacks as evidence that Syrian refugees posed a serious threat to U.S. national security. Dr. Ben Carson conflated Syrian refugees with ‘‘rabid dogs,’’ while Jeb Bush called for deprioritizing Muslim refugees from the Middle East in favor of Christians (Rappeport 2015). Senator Ted Cruz echoed this sentiment, proclaiming that Muslims should be sent to ‘‘Muslim-majority’’ countries while ‘‘Christians who are being targeted for genocide, for persecution, Christians who are being beheaded or crucified, we should be providing safe haven to them’’ (ibid.). Donald Trump called for a ban on all Muslims entering the United States (Healy and Barbaro 2015). Governors from over 32 states issued statements openly refusing to resettle Syrian refugees in their states and cities (Capps 2015).[1]

In November, Republicans and some Democrats rallied behind House Bill 4038, the American Security Against Foreign Enemies Act (SAFE Act), introduced by Representative Michael T. McCaul of Texas to slow the arrival of Syrian and Iraqi refugees in the United States, which the House voted to pass, and the Syrian refugee issue was at risk of becoming part of the year-end omnibus bill amid discussions of a government shutdown. In March 2016, the House Committee on the Judiciary voted to advance the Refugee Program Integrity

[1] Despite the anti-refugee sentiment coming from these governors, more than 62 mayors from around the United States publicly pledged in an open letter their support for refugee resettlement in their towns and cities. Many of these mayors are from the same states whose governors have taken anti-refugee resettlement positions (Capps 2015).

Restoration Act of 2016 to the House floor, which would, among other things, provide state and local veto power on resettlement and set an annual cap of 60,000 refugees, fundamentally altering the structure of the refugee resettlement system in place for over 35 years. While refugee resettlement in the U.S. has always been a politically charged topic, these more recent developments prompt debates for politicians and local communities alike over where we should resettle refugees in the U.S., how we should do it, and whether the U.S. even has the moral responsibility to resettle thousands of Syrian refugees.

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Comment [2]: Again this is a good question but I think you need to precede it with the bigger theoretical and existential ones

The Refugee Program Integrity Restoration Act points to tensions between how refugee resettlement is determined on the national level and the ability for local towns and cities to decide on how many refugees should be resettled, and even, which refugees should get resettled. In considering the future of Syrian refugee resettlement in the U.S., my primary question for this project therefore is the following: **To what degree, then, has the *ways* in which refugees are resettled on a national level affected local communities?** This guiding question necessarily leads to others: How are decisions made on where to send refugees and what are the guiding principles behind such decisions? Do these decisions make sense for both arriving refugees and local communities? Are the common problems encountered with resettlement adequately being addressed through local consultations?

Since the post-World War II period, the United States has resettled thousands of refugees every year across the country. Once a refugee's admission is approved, the resettlement system works across several federal, state, and local

government agencies to coordinate with private organizations to implement the refugee admission and resettlement process and provide various social, medical, and language services. The federal government gives private, non-profit organizations, referred to as voluntary agencies (VOLAGs), responsibility to determine where refugees will live in the United States with input and approval from the federal government. Nine national VOLAGs, which maintain a network of about 350 affiliates in communities throughout much of the United States, meet weekly to allocate individual refugees. This effectively means that refugee resettlement is a public-private partnership and therefore a very particular and narrow way of doing resettlement. This semi-privatized structure poses challenges for coordinating and implementing new policies produced nationally at the local level. Both the acute and long-term challenges posed by the Syrian refugee crisis has focused new attention on the politics of resettlement and the challenges of achieving better resettlement outcomes in the U.S. and Europe.

The complex nature of the Syrian refugee crisis is illustrative of a recent trend in refugee resettlement in the U.S. Compared to earlier periods of resettlement, admitted refugees in the last fifteen years have come from an increasing number of countries with diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Many refugees resettled today arrive from protracted refugee situations (refugees displaced for more than five consecutive years), and often have little formal education and work experience, in addition to complex mental and physical health conditions. Local receiving communities have struggled to meet the needs of these diverse refugee populations and frequently do not have the capacity or

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Comment [3]: This is all necessary background but I think you need to set it all up better

resources to provide adequate services (Committee on Foreign Relations 2010; Haines and Rosenblum 2010). Furthermore, when making placement determinations, VOLAGs often do not consult state and local stakeholders of receiving communities about their local community capacity to absorb additional resettled refugees (GAO 2012).

In Burlington, Vermont, resettlement has taken place since the 1980s, and reflects many of the recent trends in resettlement patterns discussed above. Large successive waves of Somali Bantu, Congolese, Sudanese, Iraqis, Bhutanese, and Burmese have made up the bulk of refugee arrivals to Vermont since 2000 (Portes and Rumbaut 2006; VRRP 2014). As a small city with a relatively homogenous population, Burlington has sometimes struggled to effectively absorb and acculturate its diverse refugee population. While Burlington has received immigrants in the past, newcomers have traditionally been economic migrants of European and French Canadian origin. It is only in the past two decades that immigration to Burlington has primarily consisted of refugees from conflict zones and of different racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds (Vanderbeck 2006).

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Using a variety of empirical data sources, the goal of this project will be to answer my broad overarching question—How have the ways in which refugees are resettled on a national level affected local communities? — through a series of policy-oriented, social, and spatial analyses. This project will look at two major facets of the resettlement process. I will first critically examine the resettlement determination processes put in place by the U.S. Secondly, I will examine the local consultation processes of community stakeholders in Vermont, which are

intended to address any or all issues encountered in the resettlement process and decide the extent of community 'capacity' to absorb refugee newcomers for the following year.

Following this analysis, I will then conceptualize what a 'successful' resettlement of Syrian refugees in the U.S. might look like from the perspective of state and local authorities (governors, mayors, and municipal boards), federal authorities, VOLAGs, and private sector actors). If Syrian refugees will represent the next large-scale resettlement of a refugee population, who should we accept, where would they go, and how do we promote the best resettlement outcomes?

While some of my analysis will be speculative, I will support some of my arguments from a broader examination of how the U.S. resettlement system has responded—effectively and ineffectively—to particular historical moments in refugee resettlement in the past fifteen years. The U.S. government has long been criticized for allowing its refugee acceptance norms to be guided by foreign policy interests, rather than purely on humanitarian grounds (Haines 2010). During the Cold War, for example, preference for refugee admission was given to defectors from Soviet Bloc countries, while those fleeing military dictatorships in Central and South America allied with the U.S. were almost never provided with sanctuary. I also seek to understand how local resettlement programs have been affected by these particular historical moments and the R&P program's handling of them.

I will explicitly use a geographic framework for my analysis because the relationships between international institutions, national governments, local

reception sites, nonprofits who conduct resettlement, and refugees themselves are both spatial and political in nature. Mott (2010), for example, discusses in detail the 'scattering' of recent refugees through official resettlement all across the US rather than being clustered together as seen in previous practice with Cubans in Florida or Southeast Asians in California. She argues that VOLAGs and their relationships with local reception sites play a large part in determining where refugees end up going. The goal of this analysis is to understand how the national R&P process impacts the effectiveness of local refugee resettlement programs, and to identify ways in which it can be improved based on examining how other governments are responding to the Syrian refugee crisis. I also employ a scalar analysis in this project, as refugee resettlement takes place at multiple scales of government (the White House, federal agencies, state governments, and municipal governments) and the private sector (large national non-profits and their regional and local affiliates). This spatial perspective on resettlement in the United States, I believe, allows us to synthesize and reflect upon the common problems of refugee resettlement encountered at the local, state, and federal level in a more systematic and holistic manner.

Methodology

My primary methodology for this project will be a rigorous and critical analysis of the resettlement processes put in place by the U.S. My main empirical sources will be notes from local Refugee and Immigrant Service Provider Network (RISPNet) meetings held monthly from 2007 to 2016 and notes from annual community consultation meetings to plan for the following year's refugee

arrivals. I will do a close reading and critical analysis of these notes, paying particular attention to common themes and discourses that emerge around the structural issues of the resettlement system and R&P process, in addition to the spatial politics and relationships that emerge from these meetings. I should note that these data sources are not meant to be representative of the resettlement experience in the U.S. on a national scale, or even in Chittenden County, but rather help illustrate some of the politics and discussions that take place among resettlement actors at the local level, which help contextualize and explain why we see bills like the SAFE Act and the Refugee Program Integrity Restoration Act created in the first place and what these discourses might mean for refugee resettlement in the future.

Another important source of primary data from the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS), which is used to process and track the movement of refugees from various countries around the world to the U.S. for resettlement under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). I will also incorporate qualitative interview data from a national research project on refugee resettlement that I have been working with for two years. These interviews were conducted with a wide variety of resettlement stakeholders in the state of Vermont, including local service providers, state and municipal officials, Congressional staff, and senior staff nonprofits like the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program (VRRP) and Association of Africans Living in Vermont (AALV).

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I will identify themes and trends from all of these data source to see if any contradictions or agreements exist with the different approaches to the Syrian refugee crisis, and refugee resettlement more broadly, among other major resettlement destinations for refugees, as well as the scholarly literature on refugees and immigrants. Looking exclusively at the U.S., I will also identify how the structure and decision-making of resettlement at the national level impacts the effectiveness of local refugee resettlement programs from the perspective of both local and national stakeholders. This will allow me, then, to contribute to a broader understanding how the systematic ways in which refugees are resettled in the United States affect local receiving communities, extending this analysis to understanding how this resettlement structure may or may not affect Syrian refugees coming to the U.S.

Structure of Project

The next chapter of this project will examine the spatial politics of refugee resettlement from a critical historical perspective. This chapter will largely focus on the global history of responding to refugee crises, the history of refugee resettlement in the U.S., the structure and process of the national resettlement system, and, finally, the major challenges faced by the system. Chapter 3 will engage conceptually with the spatial and political impacts of immigration and resettlement faced by the U.S. in both the long and short-term through a literature review. This review will largely explore the major theoretical debates around immigration and refugee policy at the national level, focusing on two main issues: (1) the role of the state in providing resettlement services and (2) acculturation

and integration outcomes among immigrants and refugees in the United States. As part of the broader goal of imagining a successful resettlement experience for Syrian refugees, this section will help answer the following questions: What's the purpose of resettlement? How do debates about resettlement relate to larger debates around immigration policy in the US and Europe? What have other scholars noted about how we should do resettlement?

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Comment [6]: Yes this is good but as I've said I think you need to get into it before and then you can circle back to it again later

Chapter 4 will largely describe and analyze some of my main empirical findings, while Chapter 5 will discuss whether my findings contradict or confirm broad agreements within the literature on immigrants and refugees. The final chapter of this project will synthesize my findings to provide specific recommendations for how to improve refugee resettlement in the U.S. better, as well as consider what further research scholars and practitioners alike would need to implement these recommendations, give the fact that this project is primarily a desk-study.

Chapter 2: U.S. Refugee Resettlement Background

This chapter gives a brief overview on the history of refugee resettlement in the U.S., the structure and process of the resettlement system in the U.S., and, finally, the major challenges faced by the system. The sections below are largely descriptive information, but provide necessary background information for understanding the complex web of actors and mechanisms under which refugees are admitted to the U.S., and therefore key to contextualizing some of my later empirical analysis of data sources related to refugee resettlement in Vermont.

History of Refugee Resettlement in the US

The roots of the current U.S. resettlement program lie in the wake of World War II with the need to respond to hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees and other displaced persons in Europe. A strong moral commitment, coupled with the desire to prevent refugee repatriation to the newly communist countries of Eastern Europe, prompted Congress to admit more than 415,000 European refugees and displaced persons by passing the Displaced Persons Act in 1948 and the Refugee Relief Act in 1953 (Haines 2010). Crucially, the U.S. did not ratify the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the body of international law that established the global refugee regime still in place today. The U.S. only became party to the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which expanded the geographic and temporal restrictions on the international legal definition of 'refugee.' The reasons behind this refusal to ratify 1951 Convention on Refugees mainly center around Congress's unwillingness to amend U.S. domestic refugee and immigration law to conform to international

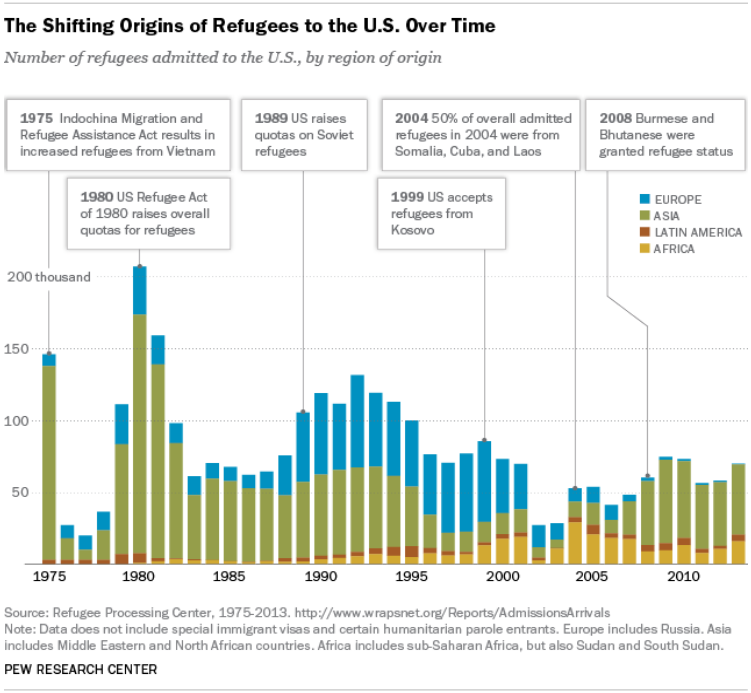
legal standards regarding asylum and *non-refoulement*, which forbids signatories to the 1951 Convention from expelling or returning refugees to territories where there is a risk that his or her life or freedom would be threatened on account of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion (Fitzpatrick 1997).

Through the post-WWII and Cold War periods, refugee admissions to the United States reflected the U.S.'s geopolitical Cold War interests in containing the spread of communism. Refugee admissions up until the 1990s consisted entirely of persons fleeing communist states. Subsequent legislation after the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 focused on persons fleeing communist regimes (mainly in Hungary, then-Yugoslavia, Korea, China, and Cuba). When the Soviet military overtook Hungary in 1956, the United States began a series of refugee programs that relied on the attorney general's 'parole' authority to provide special permission to allow entry of refugees into the country due to urgent humanitarian reasons. In most cases, parolees were admitted temporarily and later were granted permanent residence status (Tempo 2008; Hain 2010). Notably, those fleeing military dictatorships in Central and South America allied with the U.S. during this period were almost never provided with sanctuary. Hundreds of thousands of Cubans who sought asylum in the 1960s and 1970s were also paroled into the United States, as were hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asians following the fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese in 1975. The Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966 allowed Cubans present in the country for one year to adjust to legal permanent residence.

In 1975, the United States created the Indochinese Refugee Task Force to begin resettling hundreds of thousands of Indochinese displaced by the Vietnam War. Since that time, over 1.4 million Indochinese have been resettled, and together with those from the former Soviet Union, they make up nearly 77 percent of the 3 million refugees who have been resettled in the United States since 1975. Congress codified the formal refugee resettlements system as we know it today through the Refugee Act of 1980, an amendment to the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), which created a uniform procedure for admitting refugees and asylum seekers and providing resettlement services. Until the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, the United States admitted refugees on an ad hoc basis. The Act codified the definition of a refugee and the right to asylum into U.S law consistent with the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, although the U.S. has yet to become a full party to the Convention.

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 issued in a new era of refugee resettlement in the U.S., where refugee acceptance norms were no longer solely guided by foreign policy interests but also on humanitarian grounds. Civil wars in Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Sudan, among others, created high levels of displacement not seen during the Cold War. The U.S. resettlement system responded to this sharp uptick in armed conflicts by raising the annual number of refugees admitted and accepting increasingly diverse refugee populations from Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Eastern Europe (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Shifting Origins of Refugees to the U.S. Over Time, 1975-2013

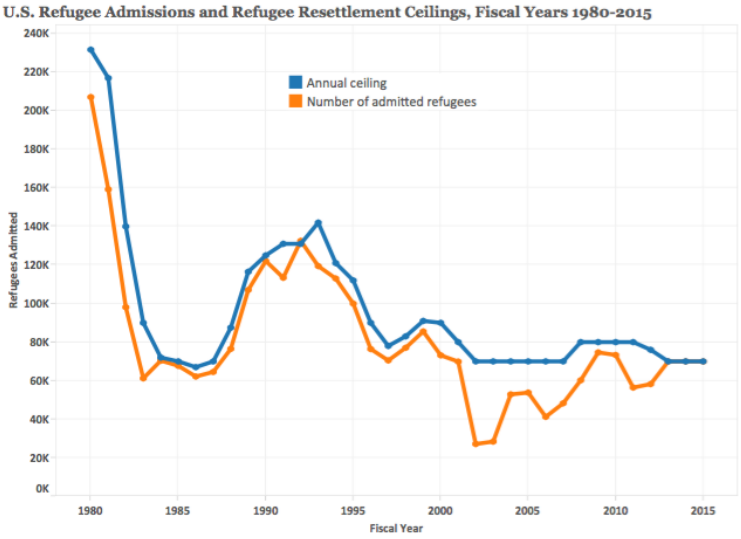


Source: Pew Research Center 2014

The September 11 attacks, however, brought refugee admissions to a standstill for several months in 2001. The number of refugees admitted plummeted in the years after 9/11, rarely reaching above 70,000, due to heighted security and counterterrorism measures (see Figure 2). The post-9/11 refugee resettlement, however, is also characterized by the ongoing large-scale resettlement of Somali Bantu and Bhutanese refugees, both of which are considered protracted refugee situations .[2]

[2] The UNHCR defines a protracted refugee situation as one in which 25,000 or more refugees originating from the same country have sought asylum in another country (or countries) for at least five consecutive years (UNHCR 2004).

Figure 2: US Refugee Admissions and Refugee Resettlement Ceilings, 1980-2015



Source: WRAPS Historical Arrivals by Region and Migration Policy Institute

Despite the end of the Cold War, we largely still see political interests driving which nationalities get resettled in the U.S., rather than purely on humanitarian grounds. For instance, Palestinians represent the largest single group of officially registered refugees in the world, consisting of an estimated 5.6 million Palestinians (UNRWA 2015). The politics of both the host countries and the United States have precluded any significant U.S. resettlement program for Palestinians. Another factor that complicates efforts to agree on which refugees get resettled out of a world total of 14 million is the 'official' definition of a refugee. The popular conception of refugee differs from the legal definition governing U.S. refugee admissions. That legal definition, based on the 1951 UN

Convention, defines a refugee as a person who is outside his or her country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. When applied with precision, the definition requires a rather specific showing that the person, or a group with which he or she is identified, is likely to be targeted for persecution on the basis of one of the five grounds. Civil war and domestic disturbances, without more, do not provide a basis for meeting the Convention refugee definition. Those who flee even intense fighting are not covered, unless the combatants had one of the stated reasons for targeting the individual or group that has fled. Economic migrants, environmental refugees, internally displaced persons, and those displaced by large development projects like dams are some of biggest groups excluded under the protections of the 'global refugee regime' established by the 1951 Convention (Vandergeest and Bose 2006; Hanhinaki 2008)

Despite resettling more than 3 million refugees in the past forty years, the U.S. resettlement system has not always responded effectively to global displacement needs. In the past five years, escalating conflicts in South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan have pushed the estimated number of refugees to more than 14 million in 2015, the highest number since WWII (UNHCR 2015). At the same time, the resettlement system has faced a number of challenges related to the long-term social and economic outcomes of resettled refugees, the impacts on local receiving communities, and the availability of adequate resources for refugee and immigrant populations,

prompting questions over *how* the U.S. resettled refugees and whether the system should be reformed. Before discussing some of these challenges, the next section will provide a detailed overview of the refugee resettlement process.

The Refugee Resettlement System

Applying for Resettlement

The resettlement process begins when a displaced individual has obtained legal refugee status from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). UNHCR refers only about 1 percent of all refugees for resettlement in a third country, and only when all efforts to either help refugees return home or settle permanently in the country of asylum have failed does third country resettlement become an option (DOS 2015b). UNHCR considers family ties, trade skills, professional abilities, language skills, and various other factors when matching a refugee with a resettlement country. Once the UNHCR refers an individual or family to the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) oversees the refugee admissions program. The refugee's application is received and processed by one of nine overseas Resettlement Support Centers (RSC). Once an application is deemed eligible for resettlement, the case is reviewed by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) for further review, background checks, and interviews with a USCIS officer. The White House, in consultation with PRM and Congress, sets the annual number of refugee admissions allowed—known as the 'refugee ceiling'—at the start of each fiscal year. Within the overall number of

refugees permitted to resettle, the determination process also sets limits for refugees coming from particular regions of the world, for example in FY2015, the ceiling for refugees coming from Africa was set at 17,000 out of a total 70,000 refugee admissions (DOS 2015a). Under the INA, USRAP sets a priority for resettlement applications based on three categories of cases (ibid.):

- Priority 1-Individual cases referred to the program by virtue of their circumstances and apparent need for resettlement;
- Priority 2—*Groups* of cases designated as having access to the program by virtue of their circumstances and apparent need for resettlement;
- Priority 3—Individual cases from designated nationalities granted access for purposes of reunification with family members already in the United States

Before travelling to the U.S., a refugee approved for resettlement must complete a comprehensive medical screening, an additional security clearance, and several classes of cultural orientation. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) arranges air travel for most U.S.-bound refugees. Before a refugee leaves the country of asylum, he or she signs a promissory note and agrees to repay the U.S. government for travel costs. From start to finish, the process of resettlement takes on average of two years from the time an application for resettlement in the U.S. is deemed eligible (USCRI 2016).

Reception and Placement in the United States

Once a refugee's admission is approved, the resettlement system works across several federal, state, and local government agencies to coordinate with private organizations to implement the resettlement process and provide various social, medical, and language services. The first three months of this process is

run through the State Department's Reception and Placement (R&P) program. The federal government gives private, voluntary agencies (VOLAGs) responsibility to determine where refugees will live in the United States with input and approval from the R&P program. Nine national VOLAGs, which maintain a network of about 350 affiliates in communities throughout much of the United States, meet weekly to allocate individual refugees and families during 'assurance' meetings. The VOLAGs currently contracted with PRM include: Church World Service (CWS), Episcopal Migration Ministries (EMM), Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC), Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), and World Relief, as well as the State of Iowa's Bureau of Refugee Services.

Local affiliates of VOLAGs begin the process of assisting newly resettled refugees find housing and employment, as well as begin the process of learning English and becoming settled in his or her new community. Following the R&P process, refugees are eligible for cash assistance and social service programs funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Refugees receive up to 8 months of Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) and Refugee Medical Assistance (RMA) through ORR's state-administered programs (DOS 2015a). Refugees can apply for permanent residency after one year and apply for U.S. citizenship after five years of residing in the U.S.

The USRAP program was designed to promote early self-sufficiency among newly arrived refugees; refugees of working-age are expected to find a job within six months of arrival. Resettlement organizations only work with refugee clients for the first 8 months, but are still eligible for many employment and social services from federal, state, and local programs. Many resettlement sites are host to several local mutual aid associations (MAAs) that work in tandem with resettlement organizations to provide many of the same services after refugee clients transition from the R&P program. The long-term outcomes of refugees following the transition of service provision from VOLAGs to MAAs and non-profits are not well-documented, one of many challenges facing the U.S. resettlement system. The next section will highlight some of these overall challenges.

Major Challenges of the U.S. Resettlement Program

A productive starting place for discussing the major and diffuse challenges of the U.S. resettlement program begins with former Senator Richard Lugar's Committee on Foreign Relations report 'Abandoned upon arrival: Implications for refugees and local communities burdened by a U.S. resettlement system that is no working" (Committee on Foreign Relations 2010). In order to better understand the challenges confronting resettlement cities and the refugees admitted to the United States, Senator Richard Lugar, ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, asked staff to assess the government's policies and programs for refugee admissions and resettlement. The study undertook field

research in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Clarkston, Georgia, and found a similar set of challenges in both locations, and can be extrapolated to other resettlement locations across the country. These challenges include:

- A serious lack of financial and organizational resources to adequately address the demands newcomers place on local schools, hospitals and social services. As the report described, "Local governments are often burdened with the weight of addressing the unique assistance refugees require, yet they rarely have an official role in influencing how many refugees are resettled by local voluntary agencies and often are not even informed in advance that new residents will be arriving" (ibid., 2).

- More recent refugee populations who have languished in refugee camps for decades. Many of these refugees are illiterate in their native language, have limited formal education, and may suffer from complex health or psychological conditions. These populations need prolonged government support if they are to acquire basic proficiency in English and the basic skills required to become employed.

- A "one-size-fits-all" model of assistance for diverse refugee populations from various cultural and national backgrounds with a range of different needs (ibid., 3). Local resettlement sites are given little warning to prepare for refugee arrivals, nor are they provided adequate prearrival information on incoming arrivals.

- Limited federal funding available to support programs that assist refugees after the initial resettlement assistance expires.

Following Lugar's report in 2010, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a study examining the factors resettlement agencies consider when determining where refugees are initially places and the effects refugees have on their communities and vice versa (GAO 2012). Their findings showed that federal agencies do not effectively measure the effectiveness of the resettlement system, integration of refugees, or exercise any oversight over VOLAGs if problems persist at particular resettlement site. Much like Lugar's report, the GAO report

emphasized ORR and PRM's prioritization of short-term employment outcomes, rather than long-term social, educational, and economic outcomes for refugees, writing:

> This focus on short-term employment, however, can result in a one-size-fits-all approach to employment services and may, in turn, limit service providers' flexibility to provide services that may benefit refugees after the 6 to 8 month time frame. That is, with limited incentives to focus on longer-term employment and wages, service providers may not help refugees obtain longer-term services and training, such as on-the-job or vocational training, which could significantly boost their income or benefit the refugee in the long-term or after employment is measured (ibid., 29).

The Lugar and GAO reports respectively highlight the challenges faced by virtually all small to medium-sized resettlement sites. While this project will largely focus on the challenges of refugee resettlement unique to Vermont, it is important to recognize the reoccurring patterns and trends of resettlement nationwide if we are to improve the overall structure of the system. The next chapter will take up these same issues, but through the lens of the scholarly and theoretical literature on refugees and immigrants.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

The chapter outlines the major theoretical debates and approaches around immigration and refugee policy at the national and international level, focusing on twomain issues (1) the role of state in providing resettlement services and (2) acculturation and integration outcomes among immigrants in the United States. As part of the broader goal of imagining a successful resettlement experience for Syrians, this section will help answer the following questions: What's the purpose of resettlement? How do debates about resettlement relate to larger debates around immigration policy in the U.S.? What have other scholars noted about how to improve the resettlement experience?

Role of the State

The current political discourse surrounding refugee resettlement in both the U.S. and Europe bring to bear the divisive views concerning the role of the state in providing services to refugees and other immigrant populations. Scholars have discussed and debated the role of territorial nation-states in responding to the needs of refugees and displaced persons within their borders. The post-Cold War period has witnessed a devolution of responsibility for refugees and displaced persons from states to such multilateral organizations as UNHCR and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian refugees, representing a reinvention and reification of states in different guises (Hyndman 2000; Ramadan 2012; Brun 2001; Hanafi and Long 2000; Lippert 1999; Mountz 2011). These dynamics not only apply to international organizations who manage

displacement, but also to both federal and private resettlement agencies in the United States.

Refugees are distinct from other immigrant groups in the U.S. as they are resettled at the discretion of the state. They receive state support for the first year and legitimacy in the form of legal residence. However, neither refugees nor the towns in which they are placed have much input on their placement, a situation that has led to many tensions and criticisms and raises questions about how local and municipal social services can adequately support an influx of new clients. If the federal government unilaterally decides who gets resettled and where they might go, should local governments and non-profits in charge of their wellbeing be responsible? Scholars have raised questions over the role and responsibility of the state and contracted private agencies like VOLAGs and MAAs in resettling refugees on a national scale and providing services.

Both Mott (2010) and Nawyn (2010), for instance, observe the the role of VOLAGs as parastatal organizations that wield enormous authority in shaping the experience and success of resettled refugees in the US. Mott (2010) for example, discusses how VOLAGS 'scatter' refugees across the U.S. through official resettlement channels in recent years, as opposed to being clustered together as with previous large scale resettlements of Cubans and the Vietnamese. She argues that VOLAGs and their relationships with local reception sites largely determine where refugees resettle and their experiences in a particular resettlement site, often making up for a lack of social networks. Nawyn (2008 and 2010) argues

that VOLAGs carrying out resettlement are extensions of state policy and social control through their rigid contracts with the federal government. She writes:

> Because much of their service provision was geared toward quick employment, most VOLAGs provided an opportunity structure that reproduced gender and racial/ethnic hierarchies in the job market…Refugees certainly have agency independent of refugee NGOs. But because these NGOs are among the first institutions with which refugees interact after arriving in the U.S., the particular ways in which they structure opportunities for refugees is relevant to their later adaptation experiences (Nawyn 2010, 163-164).

This dynamic often creates tensions and distrust between refugee communities and resettlement agencies. For example, Caron, Tshabangu-Soko, and Finefrock (2013) show in their study of lead poisoning of refugee children in Manchester, New Hampshire, that service providers held paternalistic attitudes towards their clients, creating another barrier for trust in the client-service provider relationship. The authors, in part, argue these tensions stem from the pressure placed on service providers to immediately find employment for their refugee clients as mandated by ORR. To address some these inherent tensions in the service provider-client relationship, VOLAGs have increasingly employed former refugee clients as case workers, translators, and program managers, helping local VOLAGs work through some of the cultural and linguistic barriers to service delivery. Shaw (2014) points out, however, that these 'insider' relationships with refugee clients can lead to significant problems for those in these positions, including exploitation and questions regarding one's allegiances:

> Speaking about the challenges of being in the casework position as a community member, caseworkers said it can be difficult to differentiate roles, and the expectations of the community are high…When resettlement agencies do not have adequate resources, caseworkers may feel caught between following agency protocols and meeting the unstated assumption of the agency that they will address the client's needs (Shaw 2014, 292-293).

VOLAGs are not the only ones involved in resettlement besides the refugees themselves.

Alternatively, other non-profits and faith-based social service organizations not constrained by the strict rules of federal grants and the are state are better able to help asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants access networks of food, housing, transportation, and community support. MAAs represent another facet of state extension into the lives of refugees, as they receive government funding to support their programming efforts. MAAs are typically intended to serve a particular ethnic or national community of resettled refugees in need of additional or specialized support and services not provided by VOLAGs. While at their outset, MAAs may have narrow focus on serving a particular population, they often expand into what Bose (2016) calls 'quasi-VOLAGs,' providing a broad range of services to many different refugee groups. For example, Bose's study of the Association of Africans Living in Vermont (AALV), a local Burlington-based MMA, describes its transformation from an African refugee-focused community association to a quasi-VOLAG with a similar mandate (and burden) of a state-funded VOLAG. While AALV's presence in the refugee service provider community in Vermont has undoubtedly been a positive influence on addressing particular issues in the refugee community that may otherwise be overlooked by 'outsider' organizations, Bose's case study of AALV highlights the questions faced by MMAs like AALV in terms of legitimacy, representation of clients, scope of work, and long term viability when they become part of the parastatal assemblage of organizations involved in refugee

resettlement. The challenges faced by AALV bring up concerns and questions regarding the ability and capacity of communities not accustomed to large influxes of immigrants to successfully incorporate and acculturate refugee arrivals (Committee on Foreign Relations 2010; Haines and Rosenblum 2010). The next section will exam the literature on acculturation and integration among refugees and immigrants.

Acculturation and Integration among Refugees and Immigrants in Non-Traditional Destinations

Much of the recent literature about the acculturation and integration of immigrants in has focused on Latino immigrants settling outside traditional 'gateway' cities for immigrants (New York, Chicago, Miami, Los Angeles, etc.) in places like Dallas, Nashville, and Charlotte, North Carolina (Massey 2008; Singer, Hardwick and Brettel 2008). However, the study of refugee resettlement in similar locations—mid-sized towns and regions that do not have long histories of immigration—remains fairly understudied. There is, for example, Miyares' (1998) study of Hmong resettlement in Merced and Fresno, California. Kraly and Vogelaar's (2011) case of study of Utica and the economic revitalization that has taken place as a result of the large influx of Burmese, Bosnians, Vietnamese, and Bhutanese from resettlement over the years. Although Singer and Wilson (2011) argue the positive economic impact of refugees and immigrants in large rustbelt cities is questionable; meanwhile, significant spatial segregation in housing, employment, and education among refugees remains prevalent in Portland, Oregon (Hardwick 2011). Echoing many of the same themes from the 2010 Lugar report, Pho, Gerson, and Cowan's (2011) writings on the resettlement of

thousands of Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese in Lowell, Massachusetts beginning in the 1970s demonstrate the real potential for conflict in communities without the proper support services for English language learners in school systems, culturally appropriate mental health counseling, and adequate employment. Indeed, one of the infamous cases of this type of community conflict occurred between non-refugee residents and resettled Somali in Lewiston, Maine, when, in 2002, Lewiston's mayor penned an open letter to Somali community leaders asking them to stop Somalis from moving to Lewiston to relieve the perceived economic burden of the group on the city government (Rabrenovic 2007).

Acculturation and integration is more than just a community's capacity to physically absorb refugees in a community's school system or housing market, but involves cities and towns actively addressing ingrained social, spatial, and economic inequalities and exclusions often faced by newcomers. These issues are particularly relevant for resettlement sites located in predominately white and rural or semi-rural areas like Vermont, where many refugees from Somalia, Sudan and other parts of Africa, they find their identity marked as both black and often Muslim and subjected to the same forms of stereotypes and discrimination prevalent in other parts of the U.S.

Chapter 4: Empirical Review of Data

Introduction

This chapter presents and describes my findings from my main sources of empirical data, which include primary data from the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS), qualitative interview data with refugee resettlement stakeholders, and several years of meeting notes from the Refugee and Immigrant Service Provider Network (RISPNet) and Reception and Placement (R&P) annual consultations. I identified several themes and trends that emerge from these data sources, particularly in regards to the types of discussions held (or not held) and issues raised (or not raised) over the years in Vermont's refugee resettlement community. My analysis also illuminates how the structure and decision-making process of refugee resettlement at the national level, i.e., how refugees are placed in particular locations and by whom, impacts local receiving communities and service provision in small cities like Burlington, Vermont. A narrower question this chapter looks at is whether or not decisions concerning refugee resettlement at the local level match the stated goals and purposes of the resettlement program set at the federal level, especially regarding the push to make refugees as economically 'self-sufficient' as soon as possible after arrival.

The following chapter will focus on drawing broader conclusions on this specific details and minutiae of refugee resettlement in Vermont, and whether or not the empirical data from this chapter relates, compares to, and contradicts the

existing literature and commonly held assumptions concerning refugee and immigration policy in the U.S. and Europe.

I should note that these data sources are not meant to be representative of the resettlement experience in the U.S. on a national scale, or even in Chittenden County, but rather help illustrate some of the politics and discussions that take place among resettlement actors at the local level. My data sources present a number of limitations, chiefly that the vast majority of the RISPNet and R&P meeting notes are not my own. Many of them do not contain verbatim quotations from attendees, but merely attempt to capture the broader conversations at these meetings. Even so, they contain a number of insights into the challenges and successes of refugee resettlement in Vermont over the years.

WRAPS and Census Data Overview

This brief section is intended to provide a geographic and demographic overview of refuge resettlement in the United States, answering two basic questions: (1) Where are we sending refugees? and (2) What is the demographic makeup of sites where we are resettling refugees? Answering these questions will provide a national context of refugee resettlement in the U.S., offering quantitative data of how resettlement in Vermont differs or matches immigration and resettlement trends in other parts of the U.S., as the rest of this chapter is focused on analyzing Vermont-specific data. I will present much of this data in the form of charts and maps comes from a combination of 2010 Census data and Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS), which is used to process and track the movement of refugees from various countries around the

world to the U.S. for resettlement under USRAP. I begin with a brief overview of resettlement trends in Vermont.

Refugees have been arriving in Vermont since the 1980s, beginning with large successive waves of Southeast Asians during the late 1980s, Bosnians during the 1990s, Eastern and Central African groups from 2000 on, and the Bhutanese starting in 2008 (Portes and Rumbaut 2014). The largest refugee populations represented in Vermont are Bosnians, Vietnamese, and Bhutanese with significant numbers of Somali Bantu, Congolese, Sudanese, Burundians, Meskhetian Turks, Iraqis, and Burmese also present, and a total of 6500 refugees resettled in Vermont since 1987 (RPC 2016). While the total numbers of refugees in Vermont is small compared to states such as California, Texas, or New York or to the annual U.S. resettlements of 75,000, Vermont's 300-325 refugees per year has a larger impact as a percentage of population given Vermont's largely rural, white, and small population centers, especially compared to the less than 1000 refugees resettled in New York City each year.

Tables 1 and 2 combine 2010 Census and the most recent WRAPS data to provide an overview the demographic differences between major metropolitan areas that resettle the most refugees and smaller to mid-sized cities whose refugees make up a fairly significant percentage of population in these cities from 2000 to 2010. Figures 3, 4, and 5 spatially visualize these trends, but only includes data from 2012-2015.

Table 1: Refugee Resettlement in US Major Metropolitan Areas 2000-2010

Resettlement Site	2010 Census	Refugee Placements	% of Population	% White	Median Age
Chicago, IL	9,461,105 (Metro)	9,320	0.09	49.5	33.3
New York, NY	18,897,109 (Metro)	8,000	0.04	46.3	35.6
Los Angeles, CA	12,828,837 (Metro)	2,653	0.02	55.1	34.3
Miami, FL	5,547,051 (Metro)	200	0.003	75.9	39
Atlanta, GA	5,268,260 (Metro)	4,250	0.08	40.8	33.2
Nashville, TN	1,589,934 (Metro)	5,773	0.36	63.6	33.8
Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN	3,317,308 (Metro)	28,121	0.85	70.8	31.6
Charlotte, NC	1,758,038 (Metro)	5,067	0.29	54.4	33.5

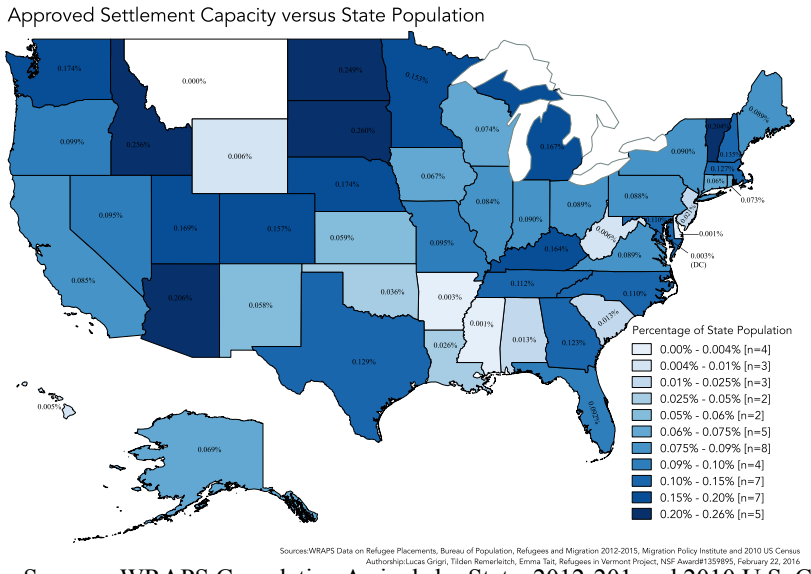
Source: US Department of State Population, Refugees and Migration Admissions – Refugee Processing Center, Refugee Arrivals as of 18-January-2012

Table 2: Refugee Resettlement in US Mid-Sized Cities 2000-2010

Resettlement Site	2010 Census	Refugee Placements	% of Population	% White	Median Age
Utica, NY	62,235	4,384	7.04	72.8	34.7
Bowling Green, KY	58,067	2,742	4.72	76.5	27.5
Twin Falls, ID	44,125	1,880	4.26	92	32.3
Concord, NH	42,695	1,941	4.55	94	40.1
Burlington, VT	49,684	2,170	4.37	98	33.1
Turlock, CA	68,549	1,678	2.45	83.5	33.3
Portland, ME	66,194	1,518	2.29	88.1	37
Richland, WA	49,090	1003	2.06	87.9	37.5

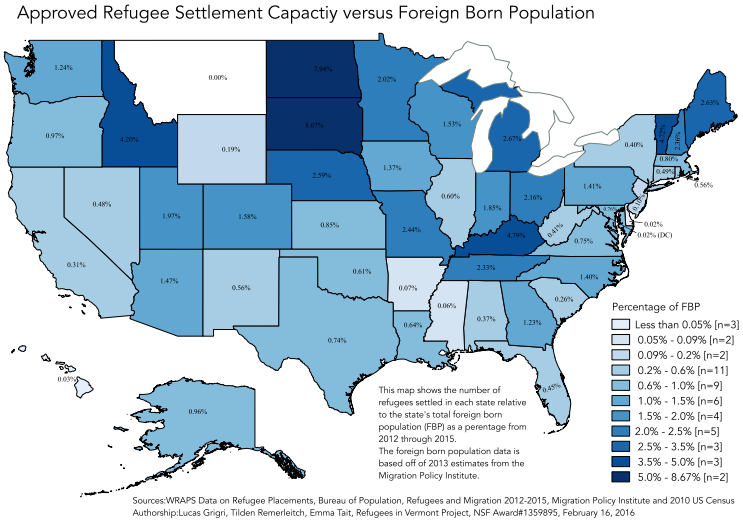
Source: US Department of State Population, Refugees and Migration Admissions – Refugee Processing Center, Refugee Arrivals as of 18-January-2012

Figure 3: Approved Settlement Capacity versus State Population



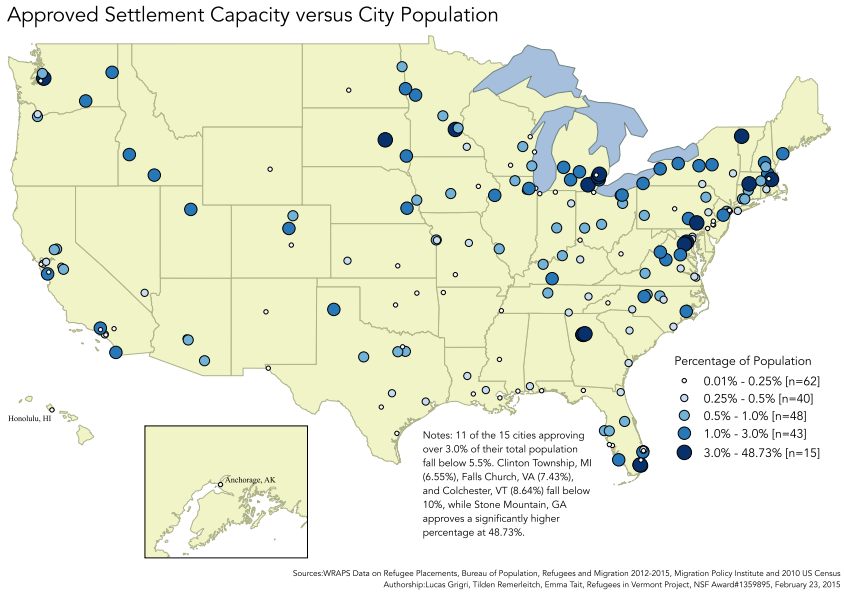
Sources: WRAPS Cumulative Arrivals by State, 2012-201 and 2010 U.S. Census Bureau

Figure 4: Approved Refugee Settlement Capacity versus Foreign Born Population



Sources: WRAPS Cumulative Arrivals by State, 2012-2015, Migration Policy Institute, and 2010 U.S. Census Bureau

Figure 5: Approved Settlement Capacity versus City Population



Sources: WRAPS Cumulative Arrivals by State, 2012-2015, Migration Policy Institute, and 2010 U.S. Census Bureau

This data collectively enhances our understanding of recent migration flows, concentrating specifically on the the pathways of resettled refugees to mid-sized U.S. cities, defined here as metropolitan areas of less than 200,000. When considering total numbers of refugees resettled in the U.S., the pattern of refugee resettlement mimics the resettlement patterns of the foreign-born in general with the highest receiving states being California, Florida, New York, and Texas. Things look different, though, when one considers the refugee arrivals over the past 15 years out of the foreign-born population in particular states—such as North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Vermont, Kentucky, and Idaho—that have

not historically attracted the foreign-born. Refugee populations are being resettled to locations with older and whiter populations and where they make up a much greater percentage of total city population as shown in Figures 2 and 3 and Table 1. While this data does not take into consideration secondary migration of resettled refugees from their initial reception sites, it does provide insight into the 'scattering' of refugees across the U.S. as described by Mott (2010). There are a number of reasons for why this trend in refugee resettlement is occurring as touched upon earlier in Chapter 2. Refugees offer an array of social and economic benefits to smaller cities, especially post-industrial cities in the Midwest with declining populations, and many cities and municipalities have requested more refugee arrivals to fulfill particular labor shortages. However, often overlooked is the role of federal and state government agencies, VOLAGs, and local resettlement organizations in shaping these migration patterns and experiences of refugees in the U.S. The following sections will investigate these actors' roles in deciding where refugees go through the case of Vermont and whether or not local capacity and community feedback is taken into account.

Refugee and Immigrant Service Provider Network (RISPNet) Meetings, 2008-2016

A crucial component of refugee resettlement in Vermont continues to be the Refugee and Immigrant Service Provider Network (RISPNet) meetings. RISPNet meetings, held every 6 weeks, are intended to provide a space for those who work with refugee and immigrant communities to discuss common challenges, problem solve, and share successes and best practices in working with

Sammie Ibrahim 3/28/16 8:26 AM
Comment [7]: Can't think of a more precise word, but you get what I mean?

refugee clients. RISPNet attendees tend to represent a larger segment of nonprofits, service providers, local government, and community stakeholders in the wider Chittenden County area than the Reception and Placement (R&P) annual consultation meetings described in the next section.

This section describes a critical review of notes from Refugee and Immigrant Service Provider Network (RISPNet) meetings from July 2008 to March 2016. I examined two sets of meeting notes—the 'official' notes the State Refugee Coordinator (SRC) distributes and Dr. Pablo Bose's notes as an active participant at RISPNet meetings over the past eight years. Both sets of notes provide a unique window into the discussions, debates, and politics around what successful resettlement of refugees might look like in Burlington, Vermont, both in the short term and long term. As the refugee resettlement system at the local levels become more politicized and debated at the state and federal level, RISPNet meetings and similar forums at other resettlement sites offer unique insight into how these discourses and policy decisions shape discussions around resettlement at the local level. While this section merely describes common themes and trends across eight years of RISPNet meetings, the next chapter will analyze how the empirical data from this chapter relates, compares to, and contradicts the existing literature and commonly held assumptions concerning refugee and immigration policy in the U.S.

Before delving into the specifics of the empirical review of RISPNet meetings, below is a brief description of the typical structure and format of the meetings. The SRC organizes the meetings and serves as the official minute taker,

sammieibr@gmail.com 3/26/16 10:44 AM
Comment [8]: When did RISPNet meetings begin?

disseminating meeting notes and relevant handouts via email after every RISPNet meeting. The structure of a RISPNet meeting, taking place over two hours at the Fletcher Free Library in downtown Burlington, typically begins with the SRC, Director of VRRP, and the Executive Director of AALV giving refugee program updates. The SRC announces the upcoming grant opportunities for service provider organizations, as well as briefs attendees on relevant discussions and announcements occurring at the state and federal level from the ORR and PRM. The Director of VRRP provides information on the previous month's arrivals and next month's projected arrivals, while the Executive Director of AALV gives updates on the organization's programming and current initiatives. The rest of the meeting is then normally devoted to two or three presentations on topics or issues relevant to the RISPNet community and a 'round table' of announcements and updates from meeting attendees themselves.

In reviewing eight years' worth of meeting notes, the nature of RISPNet's structure lends itself to focus on addressing issues of immediate concern to service providers and refugees, rather than thinking more longitudinally or holistically about the overall challenges of the refugee resettlement system in the U.S. To be fair, RISPNet meetings are not necessarily intended to address long-term challenges with refugee clients, and service providers do have the opportunity to attend the Reception and Placement annual consultation meetings to deliver some of this feedback, which offers a space for discussing some of the longer-term trends in resettlement in Vermont. However, given this somewhat rigid structure of RISPNet meetings, open and free flowing discussions among

attendees cannot take place until after the meeting is over. At times, VRRP and the SRC tended to simply announce major programming or funding shifts without consulting service providers for feedback on the potential impact of these shifts on their work, often to the frustration or surprise of the RISPNet community. This structure lends itself to two reoccurring dynamics at RISPNet meetings: (1) the tendency to only discuss issues of immediate concern to the RISPNet community and (2) the perceived lack of an active feedback process from service providers.

"Do we lose the big picture by focusing on specific topics?" –RISPNet attendee, J

Many of the discussions at RISPNet tend to center on responding to current or emerging issues in the refugee and immigrant community as opposed to anticipating or proactively addressing some of these issues systematically. Two instances, in particular, illustrate this pattern. Many of the meeting notes from RISPNet throughout 2009 and 2010 focus on low refugee employment rate in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and recession, detailing how employment counselors at VRRP, AALV, and other organizations might best use their grant funding to support their unemployed clients like offering more English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in lieu of job training opportunities. Given the push for economic self-sufficiency within eight months, a RISPNet meeting in March 2009 made it clear that a discussion of whether or not USCRI/VRRP should be resettling fewer refugees due to the tough economic climate was missing up until that point. At this meeting, several attendees representing multiple social service agencies expressed a desire to slowdown the rate of

Microsoft Office User 4/3/16 9:49 PM

Comment [9]: I do want to think about other ways of presenting some of this information. You've pulled a lot out of the meeting notes but putting them into this paragraph format kind of mushes it all back together. I would seriously consider some kind of table or graph format, just for easier visual representation.

resettlement to focus time and resources on the resettled refugees already in Vermont.

A RISPNet meeting the following year in April 2010 also raised similar concerns about the issue of housing for refugees and how high housing costs, coupled with a tough post-recession job market, are not taken into account when deciding for how many refugees will resettle in Vermont for the following year. With more refugees unemployed than in previous years, attendees from the Burlington Housing Authority voiced serious concerns about finding affordable and appropriate housing for refugees who no longer qualify for federal financial assistance for after the initial R&P process. According to the meeting notes, the SRC and Director of VRRP responded to these concerns merely by stating that a reduction in refugee arrivals would immediately result in a reduction in federal assistance for the resettlement program, and according to them, setting a precedent for future cuts in assistance and resources to the program. As one organization head pointed out in a June 2011 RISPNet meeting:

> The fact is as service providers, we are not able to provide the kind of service we would like. The federal government is responsible for this program and should better support it. It does not seem right to be making decisions about numbers of refugees being resettled based on how many VRRP *must* resettle in order for that agency to be viable. This is no way to make policy.[3]

These discussions point to an underlying, and at times unspoken, need to sustain a consistent or baseline level of refugee arrivals (between 325-350 arrivals per year) to Vermont to maintain VRRP's viability as an organization, meaning its staff levels and eligibility for grants, despite the community's stated desire or ability to

[3] Statements from attendees as captured in RISPNet meeting notes, official and unofficial, are not verbatim quotes.

successfully absorb and provide adequate services to refugees. I will discuss what this dynamic overall means for the long-term future of resettlement in Vermont in the next chapter.

The second instance I would like to highlight involves the discussions held at RISPNet during the peak of immigration of unaccompanied children (UACs) from Central America to the US during the summer of 2014. Tens of thousands of migrant children crossed the US-Mexican border due to increased gang violence and regional instability in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador in the hopes of receiving asylum due to their status as minors. Congress refused to take up the Obama administration's request for $3.7 billion emergency funding for the HHS, USCIS, and Homeland Security towards addressing the crisis, namely processing unaccompanied minor cases in immigration courts and either deporting them back to their home countries or granting asylum. HSS through ORR was tasked with providing services to support the needs of resettling those granted asylum (Chishti and Hipsman 2014).

Since there were no new Congressional appropriations, ORR in June 2014 informed all SRCs across the country that ORR needed to transfer all funding reserved for refugee discretionary grants to provide emergency services to UACs. This effectively meant at the time that the majority of grants that provide funding for employment, medical, and social services for refugees were cut by more than 50 percent for fiscal year 2015. While ORR and VRRP's original funding was eventually restored a few months later, the attendees at RISPNet meetings during this period had a difficult time coming up with strategies together for addressing

the unexpected funding gaps. These disjunctures among resettlement stakeholders at the local level point to broader questions of how to create better cohesion and collaboration among the RISPNet community within Vermont, but also regionally and nationally, especially in times of uncertain fiscal climates. As the UAC migration crisis and ongoing debates over the fate of Syrian refugee resettlement in Congress illustrate, individual refugee reception sites all the way up to national USRAP system remain subject to Congressional and party politics.

Sammie Ibrahim 3/30/16 7:53 PM
Comment [10]: Pablo, do you have any insight on this? The official notes from this period (June 2014-October 2014) are fairly vague, while your notes shed a little more light on what went down at these RISPNet meetings. Basically I'm trying to show how the UAC crisis illustrated the inability for RISPNet/resettlement to not proactively address certain issues. Is this valid or a stretch?

Microsoft Office User 4/3/16 9:52 PM
Comment [11]: You are absolutely correct – there was a huge issue about how to address this problem as it effectively meant pitting asylum-seeking children against existing refugees. Let's discuss further

RISPNet as a venue for service provider feedback?

The second dynamic I wanted to discuss at RISPNet meetings is the perceived lack of adequate feedback processes between the larger RISPNet community and the SRC. RISPNet attendees, particularly direct service providers, repeatedly expressed their frustrations in the closed off nature of Reception and Placement (R&P) annual consultation meetings (described in more detail in the next section). In one particular meeting in June 2011, one attendee pointed out the inherent contradiction between the intent of R&P meetings—to gather community feedback on planning for next year's resettlement—and the fact that the R&P contract is solely between PRM and VRRP (vis-à-vis USCRI) with no other parties involved, stating "These are two conflicting messages: Your feedback is important but it is a contract between PRM and USCRI. The consultations were an intensive process. Can we use the information from these consultations in an annual plan?" This statement points to a perception held by some involved in resettlement that RISPNet meetings and R&P consultations, at times, seem like a

formality in meeting the requirement on gathering community feedback when developing resettlement plans for the following year.

In a meeting the following year in June 2012, one attendee brought up her frustration with the lack of well-documented long-term economic outcomes among refugees as a way to measure true capacity, particularly pointing her criticism towards VRRP in failing to collect this data. This comment quickly led to a conversation around the transparency of the SRC's and VRRP's work in determining how many refugees get resettled each year, and whether the feedback and opinions of the RISPNet community is actually taken into account. Both the director of VRRP and SRC vehemently defended their actions, with the SRC arguing that "feedback and opinions, both positive and negative, are welcomed so long as they are objective and quantitative so that useful information can be pinpointed." There was also feedback from attendees to include more input from refugee community members themselves, but the SRC quickly shut the conversation down, stating that she believed that the proper steps were taken to take all communities into account. Subsequent RISPNet meetings have not taken up this issue of whether the very process under which community and service provider feedback is adequate or inclusive enough. These same dynamics that occur in RISPNet meetings also emerge in in R&P consultation meetings described in the following section.

Reception and Placement Annual Consultation Meetings, 2011-2015

In 2011, a wide range of stakeholders involved in refugee resettlement and service provision began meeting on an annual basis to discuss and provide

feedback on community capacity issues related to resettlement. These annual consultations allow for these stakeholders to then begin planning for new refugee arrivals for the following fiscal year and propose a number to the United States Committee on Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) of the maximum number of refugees that can be resettled in Vermont under the R&P program. While many of these same discussions take place in Refugee and Immigrant Service Provider Network (RISPNet) meetings held every six weeks, these meetings allow for a systematic review of the successes and challenges of resettlement from a more holistic perspective.

R&P consultations take place over several days in April or May of each year with sub-group meetings typically broken down into five main areas: employment, housing, education, and social integration. The director of VRRP, the Vermont state refugee coordinator, and the state refugee health coordinator typically lead the core group discussions, while a wider, more diverse set of stakeholders attend these sub-group consultations. These stakeholders from across these five sub-group areas might include direct service providers, employment counselors, case managers, teachers, volunteers, representatives from Vermont's Congressional delegation, municipal officials, immigration advocates, school district officials, and refugee community leaders, among others. Since 2011 R&P consultations have grown in size each year, with more stakeholders and refugees themselves represented in these discussions. In 2013 PRM issued a set of official guidelines for resettlement agencies and state refugee coordinators for consulting with local stakeholders prior to making placement decisions. This program

announcement was in direct response to the 2011 GAO report that strongly recommended greater community consultation before making placement decisions (GAO 2011). While this announcement mandated VOLAGs to provide a formal venue for consultation and feedback, my analysis will show that, despite the stated aims and intentions of R&P meetings in Vermont, these consultations do not often lead to the conditions under which service provider feedback is accounted for and then acted upon by USCRI or PRM.

This section will critically examine the notes from these R&P consultations from 2011 to 2015, where I will present a number of reoccurring themes and discussions over the years. This data includes the official meeting notes distributed by the meeting facilitators and notes taken from various individuals who participated in the meetings. These meetings hold great insight into the decisions that determine whether refugees are placed in Vermont both in the short-term and long-term. They also capture the successes, challenges, and lessons learned in refugee resettlement in Vermont, not only from year-to-year but more longitudinally, over the span of several years. The discussions and negotiations that that take place at these meetings, I argue, can tell us a great deal about the challenges and successes of resettlement across sites in the U.S., the system as a whole, and the impending larger-scale resettlement of Syrians in the coming years.

Reoccurring themes: Debates over 'self-sufficiency', housing, and employment for refugees

Nearly every year participants of R&P consultations raised questions over the meaning of 'self-sufficiency' of refugees as employed by the federal government. The federal definition of a successful R&P outcome for a refugee entails employment with 180 days, long-term housing placement, and refugee children enrolled in school (Halpern 2008). Many participants at these meetings voiced concerns over how narrow this definition of self-sufficiency was, excluding, for example, longer-term outcomes such as social integration, English language proficiency, or socioeconomic mobility. Debates over the exact meaning of 'self-sufficiency' have taken place at several R&P meetings. Part of this debate was whether total household income, which includes various forms of government assistance, should count towards the measure of 'self-sufficiency.' Some participants have argued that per-capita income might be a more accurate measure of self-sufficiency, rather than simply tabulating the costs incurred by a given household and their overall income.

Microsoft Office User 4/3/16 9:41 PM
Comment [12]: If you have specific quotes (I don't know if they are in the minutes) then I would include them

More immediately, they pointed to how the federal government's definition of self-sufficiency determined overwhelmingly the funding priorities for social service agencies that work with refugees and immigrants in Vermont. Across the five-year span of R&P meeting notes, participants voiced the desire include and develop more quantitative and qualitative measures that expand the the definition of a 'successful' resettlement that might include indicators like refugee homeownership, household income exceeding expenditures, college attendance, or increased spatial mobility. In short, stakeholders felt a large disconnect or tension between a community capacity to resettle refugees

successfully and the definition of what constitutes a successful resettlement according to PRM or ORR. The latter assumes a much shorter timeframe, while the former is a long-term, multi-generational process. These discussions pointed to an overarching anxiety among service providers that, as pointed out in the 2013 R&P consultation, that the refugee settlement is not set up to move refugees into the middle class, but instead built around survival and scraping by year-to-year on minimum-wage jobs.

These concerns connect to two other common themes that came up repeatedly in R&P consultations: (1) the long-term sustainability of housing and (2) providing gainful employment to refugees. Chittenden County's capacity to resettle refugees is almost entirely dependent on available housing units for incoming refugees, which helps explain why Vermont's resettlement numbers have largely stayed between 325-350 new arrivals over several years. Other factors, such as the capacity of local school districts and healthcare services to provide quality education and medical treatment almost always remain secondary to the capacity of housing. Service providers in these discussions frequently brought up the challenge of long, multi-year waiting lists for subsidized or Section 8 housing vouchers. While many case managers at VRRP expressed gratitude for the long-standing agreements they have with landlords to allow for reduced rental rates for refugees, these agreements are not permanent, nor do they ameliorate the structural issue of Vermont's high cost of living and the typical low-wage jobs refugees hold in their first years after arriving.

These realities make it difficult for refugees, particularly large refugee families, to move out of low-quality housing or living situations where you have multiple families living in a single housing unit. These longer-term challenges are not always included in USCRI's yearly resettlement proposal to VRRP and state and municipal officials that come out of local R&P consultations. Indeed, USCRI's 2013 proposal only stated the following about housing, "A tight housing market is mitigated by VRRP's close relationships with landlords who want to rent to refugees and often lower rental rates for clients. Related families work together to support each other as they navigate the waiting list for public housing" (USCRI 2013, 118). USCRI's statement notably does not mention the quality of this housing or the long waiting times for public housing. As I will discuss in the next chapter, the low availability of affordable, quality housing for new refugee arrivals remains a big challenge for smaller resettlement sites like Vermont to quickly respond to the federal government's policies towards addressing acute or emerging refugee crises like the Syrian refugee crisis.

The long-term challenge of housing refugees relates to a similar challenge of setting up refugees to eventually transition away from low-skilled, low-wage employment to higher-paying professions. The R&P employment sub-group has continued to grapple to come up with solutions to this challenge. Refugees in Vermont are eligible for several job training and workforce development programs upon arrival, and many of these opportunities and new job openings are announced at every RISPNet meetings. However on a deeper level, these yearly discussions from the employment sub-group bring up serious concerns that the

official definition of 'self-sufficiency' and the drive to get newly arrived refugees working within 180 days of arrival shortchange (adequately funded) efforts to set up refugees for meaningful employment with a livable age in the years following their arrival. R&P meetings over the past few years have captured some of the reasons for this. Many service providers and representatives from Mutual Aid Associations like the Association of Africans Living in Vermont (AALV) describe the narrow and inflexible definitions for who qualifies for workforce development grants. Whether this reflects reality or not, many social service organizations also voiced frustration with competition between agencies when applying for state and federal grants, often highlighting the lack of collaboration or knowledge sharing between organizations in grant applications. In addition, many state and federal grants for employment services and job training often run on one-year grant funding cycles, which makes it incredibly difficult for organizations like AALV to plan for the long-term in terms of the programs and services they provide to refugees.

This problem is not only limited to refugee employment but to the provision of other social services like education and youth services. In the 2013 R&P education sub-group meeting for example, the discussion focused on how program for students and adults in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, outcomes for success are narrow and not focused on more holistic measures of language comprehension and use. Granting organizations often measure outcomes of these programs through the number of volunteer tutors and

students enrolled in English language classes, rather than assessing the actual learning outcomes of these programs.

In looking at the RISPNet and R&P notes together, it is clear that service providers and other resettlement stakeholders believe that outcomes across a variety of areas—integration, access to resources, and social mobility, for instance are less than optimal. As the 2011 GAO report laid out, some of these problems stem from the lack of local input and consultation in determining how many refugees a community can accept and where they should go. RISPNet meetings are purported to be a space where the resettlement community can report problems and discuss strategies for addressing these challenges, while R&P consultations are intended to bridge the national resettlement apparatus with local realities of resettlement. Based on what I have described above, it is clear that the same issues and concerns are brought up year after year in both sets of meetings with no real compromise between the broader service provider community, VRRP, and the SRC. This dynamic will be explored further in the next chapter, but for now, the next section will focus on interviews with national and local stakeholders.

Interviews with Stakeholders

This section presents and offers preliminary analysis on select qualitative interview data from a national research project on refugee resettlement. These interviews were conducted with a wide variety of resettlement stakeholders in the state of Vermont and nationally, including local service providers, state and municipal officials, senior staff at VRRP and AALV, and program officers with

USCRI. These interviews are not meant to be representative of the resettlement experience in the U.S. nationally, or even in Chittenden County, but rather help illustrate some of the politics and discussions that take place among resettlement actors. These interviews contribute distinct perspectives on how the ways in which refugees are resettled on a national level affect local communities. Unlike the previous two sections, which have focused on the micro-politics and challenges of resettlement on a monthly or annual basis in Vermont, the interviewees explicitly discuss how the structure and decision-making of resettlement at the national level impacts the effectiveness of local refugee resettlement programs.

USCRI

Two interviews with program officers at USCRI, in particular, highlight the spatial politics and relationships, and their impacts, that emerge from interactions between the State Department, VOLAGs, and their local affiliates across the country. A program officer focused on grants management for USCRI noted that smaller sites are doing the bulk—more than 80 percent—of refugee resettlement. As highlighted in the previous two sections, the lower cost of living in small to medium-sized cities represents the biggest reason for why we see this trend. Another program officer focused on Reception and Placement (R&P) for USCRI made clear the spatial dimensions under which refugees are placed at a particular site. For instance, he stated that, at least for USCRI, the most significant impact on placements is whether or not the incoming refugees have previous U.S. ties. If so, they must be placed within a 100-mile radius of their tie. This key

stipulation, then, helps explain why USCRI resettles the majority of its cases in small-to-medium size locations, as opposed to large cities. By 2009, we begin to see large concentrations of newer resettled refugee groups as a result of both direct placements and secondary migration of refugees from their initial R&P site. For example, the he gave the examples of a large Bhutanese population settled in the Rust Belt, Ohio, and Texas; resettled Iraqis in Detroit, San Diego, northern Virginia, and Texas; Afghans in Sacramento and northern Virginia; the Somali in Minnesota; and the Burmese largely located in the Midwest.[4]

While their responses were specific to USCRI, both program officers offered some interesting insights into whether these site-specific placements were part of an overall strategy for resettlement. The R&P officer again noted that the presence of U.S. ties is the main driver of placement. However, for refugees with no U.S. ties, he claimed that USCRI is continually attempting to expand placement sites, so that there is not a case of overburdening any specific location with refugee arrivals. Even in trying to prevent this, he noted that there is minimal coordination or knowledge sharing between USCRI's field offices or between national VOLAGs with local sites and national VOLAGs still largely making individual or organizational decisions without consulting other resettlement organizations. This dynamic effectively means that if multiple VOLAGs are resettling refugees in a particular city or site, it is very possible (and indeed reality) that local communities or neighborhoods are overburdened by refugee arrivals from multiple VOLAGs.

Sammie Ibrahim 4/6/16 1:39 PM

Comment [13]: I think this statement is fascinating, especially since many service providers have stated at RISPNet and R&P meetings that they feel overburdened anyway. Wasn't sure if to follow through with this analysis now or in the next chapter. I do his statement is confirmed in that there is always talk of expanding resettlement to St. Albans or Barre, which comes up over and over again.

[4] He noted in particular the tendency of the Bhutanese to stay put in locations they have been settled, as opposed to other refugee groups that migrate away from their initial resettlement site.

This officer also commented that the decisions over where to place people are overly limited to cost of living, rather than discussing where might be the best overall place to put new arrivals. More specifically, he noted a need to examine past trends in placements: Are such locations still good places to put refugees? Where was the last place refugee from a particular group were put? Was it a successful experience for both refugees and the community? In a similar vein, he noted that USCRI a site's capacity for new arrivals are not compared with any national benchmarks, stating "capacities are determined on the ground so it less a national-level calculation than a series of aggregated decisions made in conjunction with a network of affiliates, field offices, and local organizations." Whether this is an appropriate way of determining community capacity for resettlement will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

The grants manager officer mentioned the personal politics at play in placing refugees, stating, "[it] often comes down to the personalities of state coordinators. Who can they [USCRI] work with? Who is open to more placements?" In addition, this officer discussed how USCRI has less influence in deciding where to place refugees among their affiliate offices compared to their field offices. With affiliates, placements often come from demand for arrivals, rather than by a national strategy to place refugees at an affiliate site. She provided Tulsa, Oklahoma, as an example of this dynamic, explaining that demand comes about through a huge variety of factors such as need for unskilled labor or desire for new immigrant businesses. However, even with places who actively seek and request refugee arrivals, serious problems arise when services

Sammie Ibrahim 4/6/16 2:46 PM
Comment [14]: Should I explain the difference in a footnote or earlier in the chapter?

for refugees do not match the influx. Based on how funding is set up for refugee service provision as discussed in Chapter 2, demand for resettlement may be there, but USCRI or the federal government may not be able to deliver services until years later.

Even so, both program officers highlighted some of the advantages for refugees in being placed in smaller cities and towns. According to them, these sites have a much more manageable size of new arrivals, compared to larger cities. There is more awareness and coordination among the general community of service providers and schools, even with those who do not primarily work with resettled refugees and immigrants. Refugee resettlement continues to create more diversity and multiculturalism in smaller communities in the Midwest, New England, and the Northwest, especially in places that have not historically experienced large influxes of foreign immigrants. Refugee resettlement in these places also tends to contribute to economic development and urban revitalization in post-industrial economically depressed areas in the Rust Belt region. Perhaps most importantly, these resettlements help mitigate the effects of ongoing demographic shifts in the U.S. As more young Americans move to large urban areas, resettlements of relatively young refugees in smaller population centers help fill the void of young working age adults.

These advantages do not overcome the intrinsic disadvantages of settling new populations in these areas. Lack of public transit remains a serious problem in these areas, which often means this lack of spatial mobility limits access to employment and job training opportunities. As RISPNet and R&P participants

also expressed, competition for low-skilled or entry-level jobs can be quite competitive in these places given their smaller economies. School districts might also struggle to provide appropriate English classes and instruction for non-Spanish speaking minorities. Even with these disadvantages, the R&P program officer also offered potential solutions for improving the system. For instance, USCRI could find better ways to document and standardize local consultations better, as well as make the consultation process as open and transparent as possible. He offered other small changes to improve the communication and coordination among the different scales of resettlement actors, including expanding VOLAG programming and expertise to broader neighborhoods and non-refugees who are in need of the same services.

VRRP and AALV

Two interviews with individuals involved in resettlement at the local level, both senior staff members at VRRP and AALV respectively. Many of the question posed to them were the same as the questions asked of the USCRI program officers. As one would expect, many of their responses were specific to the resettlement experience in Vermont, rather than on the national structure of the resettlement system. In general, the VRRP and AALV staff members I interviewed were much more reluctant to offer specific criticisms or improvements to the way the resettlement system works, even though their responses are protected under human subjects research protocol which anonymized them. This might be for a variety of reasons. My status as an undergraduate student and 'non-expert,' for instance, or that fact that I do not

Sammie Ibrahim 4/10/16 10:14 AM

Comment [15]: I want to show the similarities and differences with the responses from local state actors (Amila and Thato) and USCRI staff. I'm just not sure how to organize it. Thoughts? Should I include a sentence in the intro?

have extensive professional relationships with them or their organizations, or they may genuinely believe there are no structural issues with the R&P process or the system more broadly. This reluctance may have also come from the political climate surrounding refugee resettlement in November and December 2016 when I conducted these interviews, where anti-refugee rhetoric had reached a fever pitch nationally. My interviewees may have viewed public criticism of the system, perceived or otherwise, from resettlement actors themselves as justification for cutting federal or state funding for resettlement during a time of intense scrutiny of the system. Again, I reiterate that these interviews are not representative of the resettlement experience in Vermont, but offer insight into what is said and not said about the impacts of the resettlement system on local service providers.

Both my interviewees overwhelmingly framed resettlement in Vermont as a largely positive experience for both refugees and local communities in Chittenden County. While not ignoring the very real challenges of resettling in Vermont as described in the previous two sections, this individual repeatedly spoke of resettlement as a 'learning process' for state officials, service providers, and non-profits. When asked if there were any advantages or disadvantages to resettling refugees in both large or small cities, my interviewee from AALV responded:

> I don't know if it's a matter of big city versus small city. Of course, they may be some advantage to a big city. I think Vermont is relatively new at providing services to the refugee population…Vermont is still building its ability and capacity to help people who come from situations where they will need complex counseling services. I think those are the disadvantages. The advantages are that Vermont is a small state. It makes it easier to

> navigate the system better than if you were in a bigger city, where you might have more resources, but you may have more competitors for those resources. Whereas here, the refugee population is still pretty manageable, so service providers are figuring it out. They're building the system and capacity using smaller numbers.

Sammie Ibrahim 4/10/16 12:26 PM
Comment [16]: Do I need to include a formal reference for interviews?

Barring the housing and transportation challenges, she went to characterize Vermont as "just like" any other resettlement or immigration destination with no negative impacts or repercussions for refugees resettling in Vermont. More interestingly, she did not believe the structure of the resettlement system or the R&P process impacts how and to what degree AALV can provide services, while also expressing a desire for more prior planning for refugee arrivals, stating:

> If we knew well in advance how many people are arriving, we would be able to plan much better, and I don't necessarily think that it's a VRRP issue. In most cases, you don't know those numbers until they actually arrive. I think that's the only thing I would change. It would help with figuring out if we have the budget to adequately serve everyone, or give us more opportunity to think who we should collaborate with because the needs for different populations vary a lot.

Sammie Ibrahim 4/10/16 1:00 PM
Comment [17]: This quote is interesting to me because there seems to be a disconnect between wanting more information on arrivals to plan better, while also saying there no problems with how the system is structured, and how that impacts AALV's ability to provide services. Any suggestions for how to reflect on this without making a value judgment on Thato's statement or that she's 'wrong' or somehow uninformed.

Similarly, the interviewee from VRRP offered only general thoughts on what changes on the national level would improve the resettlement experience like offering more programs that address the long-term social and health challenges of refugees. Her only real critique very generally touched upon the grant funding process, stating "The decisions that are made at a federal level with PRM and ORR certainly have an effect on how things play out on the ground, especially when grants are slashed or when funding is being redirected from one program to another. It ultimately affects our operations, but USCRI is our advocate. They advocate on our behalf."

There was also a reluctance from both VRRP and AALV interviewees to single out any of the specific challenges or successes of resettling particular refugees, but rather highlighting the shared experience among all refugees resettled in Vermont, as one of them stated, "I think they [different groups of refugees] all have challenges. Their experiences may not be directly the same, but the bottom line is that they were all displaced from their home countries not out of their own volition." I believe this reluctance points to broader trend of service providers to overlook or neglect inter-racial, inter-ethnic, gender, and class dynamics that exist within and between refugee groups. For example, the resettled Bhutanese are largely Hindu, and therefore subscribe to a rigid and complex caste and sub-caste system even after arriving in the U.S. This caste system fundamentally impacts the resettlement experience and service provider interventions within the resettled Bhutanese community, as only higher caste groups can take better paying, more skilled employment. Similarly, there are a number of sharp ethnic tensions that exist between the Somali Bantu and Congolese refugee populations in Vermont. These conflicts led to the Somali Bantu break away from AALV and form their own less resourced and less staffed community association. These dynamics create spaces of exclusion in terms of access to resources, employment, community events, and opportunities to integrate that will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter presented findings from a variety of qualitative and quantitative empirical sources, identifying several themes and trends that have

emerged from these sources. My analysis in this chapter largely focused on the types of challenges faced by refugees that resettlement stakeholders have expressed over and over again, where I have largely attempted to answer the question of whether or not decisions concerning refugee resettlement at the local level match the stated goals and purposes of the resettlement program set at the federal level. Are the common problems encountered with resettlement adequately being addressed through local consultations? The next chapter will pull back from the details and minutiae of local resettlement politics in Vermont to draw broader conclusions on the structure and nature of refugee resettlement in the U.S., and whether or not the empirical data from this chapter relates, compares to, and contradicts the existing literature and commonly held assumptions concerning refugee and immigration policy in the U.S.

Chapter 5: Is the Resettlement Process an Effective One?

Given the very difficult challenges of resettlement presented throughout this project, how should resettlement stakeholders manage the next large-scale resettlement of Syrian refugees over the next several years? Those involved intimately with the R&P process in Vermont suggest VRRP plans to increase the number of refugee arrivals for the next fiscal year from an average of 300-325 over the last several years to 400-450 new arrivals to account for the Obama Administration's decision to raise the refugee ceiling by 10,000 (author's interview, November 2015). In other, better resourced, resettlement sites, this increase might seem quite insignificant, but to a small city like Burlington, an additional 100 arrivals has huge implications for the service provider community, affecting the ability of healthcare providers to keep up with the demands of refugees with complex physical and mental health needs, for schools to accommodate already large English language learner classes, and for case managers at VRRP to provide individualized and adequate attention to their clients.

While this is not the first time Vermont has experienced a large and sudden uptick in refugee arrivals, this decision intensifies anxiety over Burlington's capacity to absorb an additional 100+ Syrian arrivals, given the struggles already faced by the service provider community, in addition to the issue of how local input and consultation is incorporated into make these types of decisions.[5] With this planned large-scale resettlement of Syrians in mind, this

[5] VRRP resettled 1700 Bosnian refugees, or over 500 refugees a year, over a three-year period from 1993-1995 (RPC 2016).

chapter returns to the primary questions I introduced in Chapter 1: To what degree, then, has the ways in which refugees are resettled on a national level affected local communities? How are decisions made on where to send refugees and what are the guiding principles behind such decisions? Do these decisions make sense for both arriving refugees and local communities? Are the common problems encountered with resettlement adequately being addressed through local consultations? I will extract out some of the empirical evidence I presented in the previous chapter to organize this chapter around three main issues: (1) the structure of VOLAGs; (2) the reliance on a short-term grant funding model; and (3) lack of an adequate feedback process in R&P and RISPNet meetings.

Structure of VOLAGs

Evidence from both RISPNet meetings and annual R&P consultations highlight how the structure of the private-public partnerships between the federal government and national VOLAGs impact the ability of local communities to provide adequate services and absorb refugee newcomers in the long term. The implicit logic behind VRRP consistently setting the same capacity of refugees every year (between 300-325 arrivals), despite persistent concerns from the service provider community over this stated capacity, is due to VRRP's need to sustain a consistent level of arrivals to maintain its funding and staff from its parent organization USCRI. The flow of funding and resources, and therefore the ability to hire staff, from USCRI and federal grants is entirely dependent on the number of refugees resettled, rather than purely out of the need to fill gaps in service or to address an issue among the refugee community.

This neoliberal rationality to resettlement relates to an overriding politics of the VOLAG system in place. USCRI, I argue, has high stakes in toting VRRP as a success story, not only out of general concern for seeing positive resettlement outcomes for their clients, but also because VRRP creates a profit for USCRI, and is one of USCRI's more profitable sites. With the current contracting model between VOLAGs and PRM, VOLAGs like USCRI charge a high management fee for handling the R&P process on behalf of the government (author's interview, March 2016). This neoliberal logic cannot be overlooked when examining the spatial and political relationships between the local resettlement field offices, their national VOLAG counterparts, and the federal government. Despite this, it is evident to me from conducting interviews and observing half a dozen RISPNet that the staff and leadership at VRRP and USCRI are clearly driven by the mission of providing a new life and new opportunities to the displaced. However, if we are to seriously engage with the question of how to produce better resettlement outcomes in Vermont beyond an eight-month timeframe, VRRP's leadership must confront the dilemma of whether to lower their stated capacity to give their case managers and other service providers an opportunity to reduce their case loads and better focus on their current clients (and potentially receive a cut in funding and staff) or maintain the current stated capacity to ensure the financial viability of the organization.

This rationale for setting Vermont's annual capacity at the same level every year fundamentally helps shape the decisions and processes under which refugees come to Vermont, which, at times, has led to situations where the

RISPNet community becomes overwhelmed with new arrivals. These dynamics relate back to Nawyn (2010) and her argument that the funding structure of VOLAGs end up reifying the compliance-driven model of welfare as a result of demands to help refugees become economically self-sufficient as quickly as possible and move away from receiving public assistance. It also connects to another difficult challenge that local service providers, VOLAGs, and MMAs all struggle with, which is an overreliance on a short-term grant funding model.

Grant funding models and the meaning of 'self-sufficiency'

As discussed in the previous chapter, debates over the meaning of 'self-sufficiency' for newly arrived refugees came up several times in both R&P consultations and RISPNet meetings with many attendees in both spaces expressing concern over how narrow the federal definition was, excluding, for example, longer-term outcomes such as social integration, English language proficiency, or socioeconomic mobility. The push for economic self-sufficiency, i.e., employment within 180 days of arrival, overwhelmingly determines the funding priorities of both federal and state grant-making agencies and VOLAGs themselves, which focus purely on job training and placement services.

Most of these grants are funded on a year-to-year basis, rather than on a multi-year basis, which makes it difficult for service providers and organizations to plan for programming and service provisioning beyond a year at a time, meaning organizations like VRRP or AALV cannot develop a long-term vision for either their organization's role in ensuring a successful resettlement of particular refugee groups over several years. In the case of Syrian refugees for

example, their needs will differ considerably than, say, Bhutanese refugees arriving during the same period, especially because there is no significant pre-established community of Syrians in Burlington. However, the one-year grant funding model forces service provider organizations to implement a one-size-fits-all approach to delivering economic and social services to refugee populations.

This funding model also places added stress on organizations because as soon as grant monies are disbursed, within a few weeks, grant writers must reapply for the same grants for the following year due to tight federal funding cycle timelines, creating near constant pressure on organizations to apply for funding in order to pay staff salaries, rather than solely focus on their clients. The majority of VOLAG funding comes from the federal government, tying it to the whims of Congressional budget-making process, which, again, makes it difficult to guarantee VOLAGs and their field offices sufficient funding. As the unaccompanied minors crisis over two years ago demonstrated, federal funding priorities and potential for more immigration emergencies, can swiftly paralyze the resettlement program apparatus. Overlaying this crisis is the fact that USRAP is particularly vulnerable to partisan politics as legislative attempts to stymy the program in the last six months illustrate. It seems the realities of VRRP's funding model rarely make it into discussions at the local R&P consultations nor at RISPNet meetings, which begs the question of whether Burlington's *true* community capacity lies in the 300-325 range of arrivals per year.

Another, less acute, structural issue of the current grant funding model is that it does not allow for innovation or flexibility for broadly meeting the stated

objectives of a particular grant. Service providers repeatedly express their frustrations over these rigid stipulations and measures of a grant-funded program's 'success' in RISPNet meetings. Funding agencies often issue strict eligibility guidelines for grants serving refugee populations, making it difficult to serve broad swathes of the refugee community in Burlington. One prominent example of this contention is the New Farms for New Americans program (NFNA) at AALV, funded through ORR and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, among others (Bond 2011). NFNA was designed to provide capital and technical assistance to refugees who were previously farmers in their home countries with the hopes of them starting commercially viable, profitable farms.

Instead, NFNA created a community garden space for refugee farmers to grow culturally significant crops, only some of which were sold in grocery stores and farmers' markets, and more importantly, build social networks and reduce isolation and lack of socialization among refugees. However, based on ORR and USDA's narrow measures of intended outcomes, the program was a failure in the sense that it produced few, if any, commercial farmers, potentially placing the program in danger of not receiving a renewal of funding and effectively shutting down the program. Again, if we are to draw lessons from the resettlements of past refugee groups, these systemic funding issues must be acknowledged and taken into account among the resettlement stakeholders most involved in deciding which and how many refugees come to Vermont if we want to see the national resettlement system evolve and adapt to the challenges it faces.

Lack of an adequate feedback process

One key observation from analyzing several years' worth of R&P and RISPNet notes is the lack of discussion over the systemic issues, the short-term funding models as a case in point, of the resettlement program, both in Vermont and nationally. My work as a research assistant on a national research project examining refugee resettlement has allowed me to interact numerously on several occasions with service providers with a variety of organizations that work with refugee clients. The conversations I have held with them leave me to believe they are well aware of these broader systemic and structural issues of resettlement, and yet they are rarely brought up in the very spaces purported to address them. This reluctance brings up the question of whether the process of gathering community feedback as mandated by PRM and ORR is working or not. Are the common problems encountered with resettlement adequately being addressed through local consultations?

The R&P meetings are intended to bridge discussions over refuge resettlement at the national level with local realities, while RISPNet meetings are designed to provide a space for those who work directly with refugee and immigrant communities to discuss common challenges, problem solve, and share successes and best practices in working with refugee clients. Neither of these stated goals appears to happen consistently in these venues. One possible reason for this dynamic is the personal politics at play within the RISPNet community as the grants manager I interviewed stated. VRRP is the dominant actor in resettling refugees in Vermont, having great influence in deciding how many refugees will

ultimately come to Burlington through their relationship with USCRI, serving as a conduit between local and national processes of resettlement taking place. At the same time, the SRC is the state of Vermont's chief representative in making resettlement decisions as well, and has great sway in determining the flow of funding from state agencies to VRRP and other service provider organizations.

For many, many years, there were a number of tensions between the head of VRRP and the SRC, battling for control over who had the ultimate authority in deciding how many refugees came to Vermont each year. Service providers often felt caught in the middle between the in-fighting between the SRC and head of VRRP, not wanting to openly criticize either organizations' actions lest their organization faced negative consequences or strained relationships. This contributed noticeably to a tense atmosphere in both RISPNet and R&P meetings for many years; although in 2014, transitions in the leadership of VRRP has noticeably made RISPNet meetings more relaxed and discussion more free-flowing than in the past. Even so, RISPNet meetings continue to be coordinated and managed by the SRC, meaning the rigid structure of RISPNet meetings described in the previous chapter can only shift so much. The turnover rate and short-term contracts among service providers who serve refugee populations means that the institutional memory of resettlement organizations that comes with encountering and addressing particular challenges can often get lost. This is reflected in the fact that service providers bring up the same issues and concerns year after year in both sets of meetings with no real compromise between the broader service provider community, VRRP, and the SRC. For instance, the issue

of how to set refugees up to transition to affordable, quality housing without relying on public assistance or addressing the long-standing issue of access to public transportation for refugees are not addressed.

Another set of politics that prevents much needed feedback or criticism on behalf of service providers is the fact that no one wants to be perceived as 'anti-refugee.' This desire for the RISPNet community to be collectively be seen as 'pro-refugee' have always been a factor in the lack of constructive criticism towards the SRC, VRRP, or the system in general, the case of the Syrian refugee crisis made this dynamic especially clear. This past fall when the head of VRRP announced they would increase the number of refugee arrivals to 400-425 with almost no input from the broader service provider community, the head of the R&P health sub-group was the only one to point out the implications of increasing Vermont's capacity, stating healthcare providers in the community already had a hard enough time in meeting demand for medical services. However, the R&P meetings only a few months before suggested that refugees and service providers alike felt overly burdened. Again, given the continued Islamophobic discourse surrounding the admission of Syrian refugees, no one who works directly with refugees wanted to be seen as openly criticizing refugee resettlement during during a time of intense scrutiny of the system.

Finally, the serious lack of substantive feedback from refugees themselves must be included in any evaluation of the consultation process put in place by ORR and PRM. Throughout many years of RISPNet and R&P meetings, many of the refugees included in these consultative processes are ones that can be

considered ‘success’ stories in moving through the resettlement process. In R&P meetings especially, there are many anecdotes shared among attendees about the successes of settlement (e.g. ‘so-and-so enrolled in college’ or ‘this family purchased a house’), but many times these are not grounded discussions in which these successes are put into context of how a particular refugee community is doing as a whole. By ‘grounded,’ I mean that the ‘average’ refugee parent or student, nor the teachers who work with them, is often not included in discussions around education at R&P meetings, for instance. This tendency points to the cultural barriers that often gets overlooked when service provider organizations *do* try to solicit feedback from refugees on particular programs or issues affecting their respective communities. For instance, there are strongly-held cultural norms among Bhutanese refugees where they will rarely say anything negative or criticize authorities (in this case, AALV or VRRP), despite feeling otherwise (author’s interview, March 2016). This lack of broader feedback and inclusion of the refugee community in these consultations clearly has an impact in clearly capturing Burlington’s true capacity to absorb new refugees from year to year.

By focusing on these three main issues, this chapter has shed light on how the ways in which refugees are resettled nationally through a private-public partnership between VOLAGs and the federal government directly affect the resettlement experience and long-term outcomes for refugees and local communities in smaller resettlement sites like Burlington, Vermont. Through highlighting these issues of funding, the feedback process, and the personal politics in place at the local level in this chapter, the final chapter of this project

will introduce several recommendations for resettlement organizations like VRRP to apply the lessons learned from previous large-scale resettlements of refugee groups in anticipation of the resettlement of thousands of Syrians in the years to come. In doing so, this chapter will also consider the limitations and potential future research directions for this project.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In anticipating the resettlement of over 10,000 Syrian refugees over the course of the next fiscal year, this project examined the follow question: To what degree, then, has the *ways* in which refugees are resettled on a national level affected local communities? This guiding question necessarily prompted others: How are decisions made on where to send refugees and what are the guiding principles behind such decisions? Do these decisions make sense for both arriving refugees and local communities? Are the common problems encountered with resettlement adequately being addressed through local consultations? Through an intensive review of RISPNet and R&P meeting notes, analyzing interview data, and looking at the broad trends of the kinds of place refugees are being resettled, it is evident that the way refugees are resettled in places like Vermont needs to be changed if the national resettlement system is able to remain viable and produce better resettlement outcomes in the long term.

Recommendations

The recommendations presented below stem directly from the three primary issues introduced in the previous section. They were developed to apply to address a range of common challenges faced by local resettlement sites beyond Burlington, Vermont. Following a discussion of these recommendations, I will address the overall limitations and future directions of this research. 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. 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. Policy makers in collaboration with refugee resettlement agencies can capitalize on the fact that they do not necessarily need to draft new legislation to affect change. These recommendations include:

1. ORR and PRM should commission a comprehensive study of the resettlement system to determine optimal grant funding level and the federal government should increase funding to that level and guarantee that funding level for multiple years at a time. Given the reactive way in which the resettlement system developed, no such analysis has ever been done on the domestic side of the system. 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. Local resettlement sites like VRRP will not be forced to accept more refugees than they can handle as a means for ensuring consistent levels of funding and staff as the current system is set up.

2. **PRM should ensure that resettlement projections collected by the UNHCR and International Organization for Migration are passed on to receiving agencies in advance**. ORR, VOLAGs, and local 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.

3. **All agencies should consult refugees at every stage to the extent feasible about decisions affecting them**. Refugee community leaders should be invited to attend R&P and RISPNet meetings and pass along comments and proposals to their communities and be given adequate time to respond. 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 needs. It also restores choice and agency into the resettlement equation.

4. **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**. The guidelines set forth by PRM clearly state that representatives of VOLAGs should meet at least 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 organizations on the ground and federal agencies will allow for better-informed decisions on refugee placement and service allocation.

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

6. **Local field offices and affiliates of VOLAGs 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.

7. **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 more valuable way.

Limitations and future areas of research

The main limitation of this project is that it is primarily a desk-study with several constraining limits on my sources of empirical data. I attended only a

handful of RISPNet meetings in my time as research assistant on a larger national project on refugee resettlement, meaning that my own notes and the official notes of RISPNet meetings were only meant to capture the broad strokes of the discussions at these meetings and not the verbatim conversation. Similarly with the R&P meeting notes I did not attend these meetings in-person, but rather drew my analysis solely through meeting notes taken by others. As discussed in Chapter 4, I encountered a number of problems in trying to elicit candid feedback on the challenges of resettlement and the R&P process in my interviews with local resettlement stakeholders. Finally, one last limitation of this research is that I did not attempt to gather insight on the issues of R&P and the broader structure of resettlement from refugees themselves due to serious constraints of time and resources. Such an addition would add richer insight into the both challenges and successes of resettlement from refugees who go through the process. In terms of future directions for this research, a similar analysis of the R&P process and community-specific challenges at other resettlement sites, both with similar and differing demographics as Burlington, Vermont, would contribute to a broader, more critical understanding of how resettlement policy at various levels (federal, state, and local) affects refugees' everyday lives, and hopefully provide a basis for which to improve the system at these different levels as the U.S. prepares to take in an additional 10,000 Syrian refugees in the coming years.

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