

GAO

Briefing Report to the Honorable  
Vic Fazio, House of Representatives

June 1993

# REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

## Initial Reception and Placement Assistance



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**National Security and  
International Affairs Division**

B-253284

June 18, 1993

The Honorable Vic Fazio  
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Fazio:

This report responds to your request for information on the initial resettlement assistance provided refugees entering the United States. The State Department's refugee reception and placement program establishes cooperative agreements with private voluntary agencies and provides them with per capita grants to assist refugees with their basic needs during their first 90 days in the United States. The objectives of our review were to determine (1) what assistance the voluntary agencies agree to deliver, (2) how they provide the assistance, and (3) whether they are fulfilling their agreements.

We briefed your staff on the progress of our review on March 11, 1993. This report summarizes the results of our review.

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**Results in Brief**

The Department of State's Bureau of Refugee Programs cooperative agreements with the voluntary agencies require that each refugee be provided or offered the assistance described in the agreement for up to 90 days. There is no requirement in the agreements that each refugee receive the same level of assistance (amount of cash, goods, or services) from the agencies, their affiliates, or any other source.

Voluntary agencies vary greatly in how they address agreement requirements. The reasons for the differences include the agencies' geographic locations and the types of refugees resettled.

The Bureau's monitoring and independent financial audits, as well as a prior GAO report and our audit work on this assignment, indicate that voluntary agencies are providing or ensuring the provision of the goods and services required by the agreements. In most cases, when the refugee has family already in the United States, voluntary agencies are meeting the agreement requirements with the assistance (financial and otherwise) of family members.

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## Background

The Refugee Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-212) established the policy of providing transitional assistance to refugees entering the United States.

The refugee initial reception and placement program is administered by the Department of State's Bureau of Refugee Programs. Its purposes are to integrate refugees into American society and to help them achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible. In fiscal year 1992, the Bureau distributed about \$77 million to 12 voluntary agencies (Volags) that provided initial resettlement services to 131,481 refugees.

Under the State Department's program, the Bureau enters into cooperative agreements with the Volags, which are private nonprofit organizations. The Volags, in turn, generally use their network of some 500 affiliates to provide needed services to refugees. Affiliate offices include independent agencies contracted for providing resettlement services, affiliated religious organizations, and other regional or subsidiary offices, and receive Bureau resettlement funds from the Volags with which they are associated.

To receive resettlement funds, each Volag must submit annually to the Bureau a proposal that includes information on how the Volag plans to meet the requirements of the cooperative agreement. Each Bureau-Volag agreement includes program, financial, and reporting requirements that must be met during refugees' initial 90-day reception and placement period. The Bureau allocates resettlement funds to the Volags on a refugee per capita basis and distributes the funds upon the actual arrival of refugees in the United States. The fiscal year 1992 per capita grant was \$588; the fiscal year 1993 grant is \$630 per refugee. The per capita grant is meant to cover the cost of direct assistance (such as food, housing and clothing) and any affiliate or Volag management, administrative, and service delivery expenses related to refugee resettlement.

There are two basic types of refugees under the program: free refugees and family reunification refugees. The first consists of refugees who have no relatives or friends in this country and so must rely on the sponsoring Volag for all resettlement assistance. The second consists of refugees who have an "anchor"—a relative or friend—in the United States who may provide some resettlement assistance, depending on the anchor's means. In fiscal year 1992, about 20 percent of the refugees were free cases, the remainder family reunification.

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## Agreements Allow Discretion to Volags in Refugee Resettlement

The language of the Bureau's cooperative agreements give Volags and their affiliates flexibility in the assistance provided to refugees. According to Bureau officials, the Volags, and their affiliate staffs, this flexibility is essential because refugees have differing resources and needs. All refugees may not need or take advantage of all assistance described in the agreements.

The agreements describe the core services that must be provided or made available to refugees for at least 90 days, unless otherwise stated. However, the agreements do not require that affiliates themselves provide all the required core services or that refugees accept unwanted or unneeded assistance. Core services consist of pre-arrival, reception, establishing a casefile for each refugee, providing basic needs support, and other services.

Pre-arrival services include sponsoring the refugee and submitting sponsorship assurances to the Refugee Data Center, which is responsible for processing assurances. Reception services include facilitating travel of refugees to resettlement sites in the United States and ensuring that they are met at the airports of final destination and transported to their living quarters.

Basic needs support services include providing or ensuring the provision of decent, safe, and sanitary housing; essential furnishings; food or a food allowance and other basic necessities; necessary clothing; and transportation to job interviews and job training. Volags must provide or ensure the provision of basic needs support services for at least 30 days after the refugees' arrival.

Other services that may be provided or made available include community, employment, and health orientation and referrals, and development and monitoring of a resettlement plan for each refugee.

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## Agreement Requirements May Be Delegated to Others by Volags and Affiliates

Volags may delegate most service delivery requirements to their affiliates. Affiliates may further assign resettlement assistance requirements to suboffices and cosponsors. The agreements also do not preclude anchor relatives and others from providing resettlement assistance. For example, for family reunification refugees, the affiliate may delegate some of the responsibilities in the agreement to the refugees' relative(s) in the United States. These responsibilities may include receiving the refugee at the airport, providing housing, food, clothing, and other necessities.

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Nevertheless, the Volags are ultimately responsible for assuring that the requirements of the agreements are met.

To ensure that cooperative agreement requirements are met within the appropriate time frames, the agreements require Volag affiliates to maintain casefile documentation, including refugee status reports, which are submitted to either the Volag or to the Bureau. Affiliates must document basic needs assistance provided refugees during their first 30 days in the country. In addition, the Bureau requires 90-day reports that document the services made available to the refugees during their first 90 days after arrival and their the employment status as of that time. Volags must also maintain 180-day employment status reports for free case refugees only. The Bureau uses the 90- and 180-day reports to evaluate the effectiveness of Volags in meeting the program goal of moving refugees toward self-sufficiency.

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### Agreements Do Not Require Uniform Distribution of the Per Capita Grant

There is no requirement—in the agreements or otherwise—that each refugee receive the same assistance or that Volags expend at least the per capita grant amount on each refugee. The agreements state that the per capita funds be used only to perform the Volag's responsibilities under the agreement and may not be used to cover expenses of unrelated activities.

The Bureau does not require that each refugee receive identical services or the same amount of financial assistance. Although the Bureau expects that refugee resettlement assistance may include some cash payments to refugees, the amount of these payments may vary depending on what other services or benefits are provided.

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### Volags Differ in How They Meet Agreement Requirements

Given the flexibility afforded by the Bureau agreements, Volags and their affiliates meet the agreement requirements in different ways. They differ in the type of housing they provide, the amount of cash they distribute, the frequency with which they refer refugees to welfare, how they provide employment—either directly or by referral—and to what extent they rely on relatives. These differences appear to be primarily the result of the affiliates' locations and the types of refugees resettled.

Local social services and employment opportunities have an impact on affiliates' resettlement programs. For instance, in Washington, D.C., one affiliate that resettles refugees focuses its efforts on finding employment for refugees in nearby hotels. Refugees generally live in the immediate

area of the affiliate and have easy access to their workplace via public transportation. However, the cost of living in Washington limits the type of housing the affiliates can afford to provide. For example, we found two families of four each living in studio apartments. By contrast, another affiliate, which resettles refugees in an area with fewer employment opportunities, immediately refers refugees to the local welfare office.

The type of refugee resettled by the affiliate has an influence on the resettlement program. For example, one affiliate that resettled only family reunification cases did not provide much financial or other assistance, relying instead on anchor relatives to provide most of the core services. Other affiliates that resettled mostly free cases were much more involved in directly assisting refugees. Even within the same affiliate, similar types of refugees are resettled differently based on their individual needs. An affiliate may refer an English-speaking refugee with job skills to an employment counselor immediately. In contrast, the same affiliate may refer a non-English speaking unskilled refugee to English-as-a-Second-Language classes and job training.

## Volags and Their Affiliates Are Generally Meeting the Cooperative Agreement Requirements

Our survey work—which included on-site review of affiliates' resettlement activities, review of past GAO work on refugee resettlement, analysis of the Bureau's affiliate monitoring reports, and review of the Volags' financial audit results—showed that Volags and their affiliates were generally in compliance with their agreements.

### GAO's On-Site Review of Affiliates Shows Compliance With the Agreements

On-site review of five Volag affiliates and reviews of 24 resettlement cases indicated the affiliates were providing refugees the assistance required by the agreements. At each affiliate we interviewed affiliate staff and selected refugees, and reviewed selected refugee casefiles.

We found that resettlement staff were usually knowledgeable about the agreements and that the affiliate's resettlement program covered all the agreement requirements.

The casefiles we reviewed at each affiliate were generally complete and the services offered and provided were well documented. In most cases, the date of service and the provider's name were also indicated on the

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record. When the casefile indicated that refugees had not received a service within the appropriate time frame, it was because of external factors such as difficulty in getting children vaccinated for school enrollment or in obtaining appointments for health screening within 30 days.

Our interviews with refugees corroborated the casefile documentation. All the refugees interviewed expressed satisfaction with the assistance they had received from their affiliates. Almost all the refugees told us that they had received or had been offered core services either by affiliate staff, volunteers, or their anchor relatives. Two refugees, however, felt that they did not get enough assistance in finding employment.

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### GAO's Past Work on Resettlement Shows Compliance With the Agreements

The above results were consistent with a previous GAO report that extensively studied the initial resettlement assistance provided by Volags and their affiliates.<sup>1</sup> It found that 94.3 percent of refugees included in the study received the required core services and 84.1 percent received the other employment-related services.<sup>2</sup>

The study included interviews with officials at the 12 Volags and on-site work at affiliates at 5 locations. The on-site work included a review of 592 casefiles representing 1,454 refugees and interviews with 67 refugees.

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### Recent Bureau Monitoring Shows Compliance With the Agreements

The Bureau's Office of Reception and Placement monitors Volags and their affiliates to assure that they are complying with program requirements. The monitoring visits generally consist of resettlement staff interviews, casefile documentation reviews, and since fiscal year 1992, refugee interviews at each affiliate. The Bureau's monitoring results show that Volag affiliates are generally meeting agreement requirements. In fiscal year 1992, the Bureau monitored 35 affiliates at 10 locations around the country. Of these, only one was rated as unsatisfactory—because of inadequate casefile documentation. Of the 34 remaining affiliates, 32 were rated as satisfactory, commendable, or outstanding; 2 were not rated.

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<sup>1</sup>Refugee Program: Initial Reception and Placement of New Arrivals Should Be Improved (GAO/NSIAD-86-69, Apr. 7, 1986).

<sup>2</sup>The study used the Bureau's 1984 agreements with Volags, which did not consider employment-related services as part of core services.



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## Independent Financial Audits Show Funds Are Used in Compliance With the Agreements

Recent completed financial audits of four Volags show that they are using the per capita funds in compliance with the requirements of applicable laws and regulations, including the Bureau agreements. Under the cooperative agreements, the audits must be conducted under the guidelines of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-133. The A-133 requirement, effective as of January 1990, requires a biennial audit of all nonprofit institutions receiving at least \$25,000 in federal funds. The audits must be conducted by independent public accountants using generally accepted government auditing standards.

Officials of the State Department's Office of Inspector General told us their reviews of these audits found that Volags met the requirements of OMB Circular A-133.

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## Scope and Methodology

In conducting our review we interviewed and obtained documents from officials at the State Department, voluntary agencies and their affiliates, and the Refugee Data Center.

We selected five Volags that resettled about 80 percent of all the refugee arrivals in fiscal year 1992. They are The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society; U.S. Catholic Conference; International Rescue Committee, Inc.; Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service; and American Council of Nationalities Service.

We conducted work at one affiliate of each of the five Volags. At each affiliate, we interviewed resettlement staff, reviewed refugee casefiles, and interviewed refugees. For the casefile review and interviews, we selected refugees who arrived in the United States between September 1, 1992, and November 30, 1992. Where possible, the refugees were selected to ensure a mix of large and small families, free and family reunification cases, different places of birth, and varying lengths of time spent in the United States.

Our 1986 report on the initial reception and placement of new refugee arrivals, which included extensive casefile reviews and interviews with refugees, concluded that Volags and their affiliates were generally complying with their cooperative agreements with the State Department. In addition, on this assignment we found the Volags and their affiliates appeared to be delivering the agreed upon assistance to the arriving refugees included in our work. On the basis of available evidence and the lack of indications of significant shortfalls in the Volags delivery of

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assistance, we did not believe a longer-term, nationwide examination of resettlement assistance by the Volags was warranted. On March 11, 1993, we briefed a member of your staff on the progress of our review. Based on our presentation, your office agreed with our decision not to expand the scope of the review to a nationwide effort.

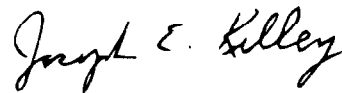
We conducted our review between October 1992 and March 1993 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. We discussed the information in this report with Bureau officials, who generally concurred with its contents, and have incorporated their comments where appropriate.

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Unless you announce its contents earlier, we plan to make no further distribution of this report until 30 days after its issue date. At that time, we will send copies to the Secretary of State and interested congressional committees. We will also provide copies to others upon request.

If you or your staff have any questions concerning this report, please contact me at (202) 512-4128. The major contributors to this report were David R. Martin, Assistant Director, National Security and International Affairs Division, Washington, D.C.; and Preeti Singh Jain, Senior Evaluator, and Christina Porche, Evaluator, New York Regional Office.

Sincerely yours,



Joseph E. Kelley  
Director-in-Charge  
International Affairs Issues

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