



February 2018

AFGHAN AND IRAQI SPECIAL IMMIGRANTS

More Information on Their Resettlement Outcomes Would Be Beneficial

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-107](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Certain Afghan or Iraqi nationals who worked for the U.S. government and may have experienced serious threats due to this work may qualify for an SIV. An SIV allows them and eligible family members to resettle in the United States, and since 2008 over 60,000 SIV holders (principal holder and family members) have done so. Upon arrival, they are eligible for resettlement assistance from State and HHS. GAO was asked to review SIV holders' resettlement outcomes and challenges.

This report examines (1) available data on SIV holders' employment and other outcomes, (2) challenges affecting their resettlement, and (3) federal efforts to help address challenges. GAO analyzed the most recent federal data (State: 2010-2016; and HHS: 2016) on SIV holders' outcomes; interviewed officials from nine national resettlement agencies; and visited three states (CA, TX, and VA) where over half of SIV holders resettled. In these states, GAO interviewed the states' refugee coordinators and, for two local areas with relatively high levels of SIV resettlement, interviewed local resettlement agency officials and conducted focus groups with SIV holders. GAO also reviewed relevant federal laws and policies and interviewed federal officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that 1) HHS consider including SIV holders in its annual survey on refugees' longer-term outcomes, and that 2) State provide more detailed information on key issues to prospective SIV holders. Both agencies agreed with our recommendations.

View [GAO-18-107](#). For more information, contact Kathryn Larin at (202) 512-7215 or larink@gao.gov.

February 2018

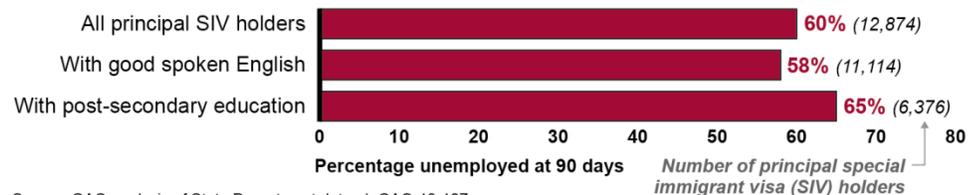
AFGHAN AND IRAQI SPECIAL IMMIGRANTS

More Information on Their Resettlement Outcomes Would Be Beneficial

What GAO Found

Since fiscal year 2011, about 13,000 Afghan and Iraqi nationals (excluding family members) have resettled in the United States under special immigrant visas (SIV), but limited data on their outcomes are available from the Department of State (State) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). State collects data on SIV holders' resettlement outcomes once—90 days after they arrive. GAO's analysis of State's data from October 2010 through December 2016 showed that the majority of principal SIV holders—those who worked for the U.S. government—were unemployed at 90 days, including those reporting high levels of education and spoken English. Separately, HHS collects data on about one-third of resettled SIV holders (those in one HHS grant program). According to HHS's fiscal year 2016 data (the only year available), most of these SIV holders were employed and not receiving cash assistance 6 months after arrival; however, these data are not representative of all SIV holders. GAO did not identify any outcome data for SIV holders beyond 6 months after arrival. HHS annually surveys refugees up to 5 years after arrival, but does not do so for SIV holders. However, it has occasionally used its survey of refugees to analyze selected groups at no additional reported cost. Such analysis could provide valuable information on whether SIV holders have achieved longer-term assimilation, consistent with HHS' mission and program goals.

Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Holders Who Were Unemployed 90 Days After Arrival, October 2010-December 2016



Source: GAO analysis of State Department data. | GAO-18-107

Stakeholders GAO interviewed reported several resettlement challenges, including capacity issues in handling large numbers of SIV holders, difficulties finding skilled employment, and SIV holders' high expectations. Officials from local resettlement agencies in Northern Virginia reported capacity challenges for their agencies and the community due to the large increase of SIV holders. In almost all of GAO's focus groups with principal SIV holders, participants expressed frustration at the need to take low-skilled jobs because they expected that their education and prior work experience would lead to skilled work.

State and HHS have taken steps to address some resettlement challenges. For example, in 2017 State placed restrictions on where SIV holders could resettle and HHS announced a new grant to support career development programs for SIV holders, refugees, and others. In addition, State provides information to prospective SIV holders about resettlement. However, the information is general, and lacks detail on key issues such as housing affordability, employment, and available government assistance. Providing such specifics could lead to more informed decisions by SIV holders on where to resettle and help them more quickly adapt to potential challenges once in the United States.

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Abbreviations

HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
ORR	Office of Refugee Resettlement
PRM	Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration
R&P	Reception and Placement program
SIV	special immigrant visa
State	Department of State
TANF	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

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February 20, 2018

Congressional Requesters

Afghan and Iraqi nationals who were employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government in Afghanistan or Iraq and have experienced ongoing serious threats as a consequence of such employment, or who worked directly with the U.S. Armed Forces or under chief of mission authority as a translator or interpreter, may apply for a special immigrant visa (SIV) to the United States.¹ Upon securing a visa, the principal SIV holder and his or her eligible dependents may resettle in the United States and are granted lawful permanent resident status upon admission into the United States. Since fiscal year 2008, over 60,000 individuals—about 20,000 principal SIV holders and their families—have been admitted under SIVs and received federal resettlement assistance upon arrival.²

SIV holders are authorized to receive resettlement assistance from the Departments of State (State) and Health and Human Services (HHS), as well as federal public benefits, to the same extent and for the same periods of time as refugees.³ In fiscal year 2016, SIV holders accounted

¹There are various special immigrant categories, but for purposes of this report we use the term “special immigrant visa” to refer to visas issued to nationals of Afghanistan or Iraq under one of the programs discussed in this report. Also, unless noted otherwise, the “principal SIV holder” refers to the sole principal applicant, who is the individual who applied for and was approved to resettle in the United States under a special immigrant visa (SIV). The visa also allows for certain eligible family members, such as a spouse, to accompany the principal applicant to resettle. For this report, “SIV holders” refers generally to the principal applicant and their accompanying family members, and “SIV spouse” refers specifically to the spouse of the principal applicant. “Chief of mission” refers to the principal officer in charge of a U.S. diplomatic mission, generally the U.S. ambassador to a foreign country, who has full responsibility for the direction, coordination, and supervision of all U.S. government executive branch employees in that country, with some exceptions.

²This is the number of SIV holders (principals and eligible family members) who arrived in the United States and also received resettlement assistance, based on data tracked by the Department of State (State). In contrast, the Department of Homeland Security tracks the number of individuals who obtained lawful permanent resident status under these SIVs, regardless of whether they elected to receive resettlement assistance. In fiscal years 2010 through 2015 (the most recent available data), about 80 percent or more of those who obtained lawful permanent resident status under these SIVs as new arrivals to the United States received resettlement assistance. For the rest of this report, we use State data regarding SIV holders who received resettlement assistance.

³Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2010, Pub. L. No. 111-118, § 8120, 123 Stat. 3409, 3457 (2009).

for about 13 percent of all individuals served by State's resettlement program, which totaled \$228 million in federal obligations for all individuals served. For the same year, SIV holders accounted for about 8 percent of the total individuals served by HHS's refugee resettlement programs, which totaled \$656 million in federal obligations for all individuals served. Some of these resettlement programs are administered through nine national voluntary resettlement agencies and their network of over 200 local affiliates.⁴ State and local social service offices may also be involved in administering resettlement assistance. This assistance is generally provided for 6 to 8 months after an individual's arrival in the United States, and individuals are expected to be self-sufficient as soon as possible.

Although SIV holders make up a relatively small number of individuals receiving assistance from these programs, in light of the vital services they provided to U.S. interests overseas, policymakers and others have sought information about meeting SIV holders' needs when they resettle in the United States. GAO was asked to report on challenges faced by SIV holders when resettling in the United States and how they fare in employment and other outcomes. In this review, we examined the following research objectives:

- (1) What do available resettlement data show regarding employment and other outcomes for SIV holders?
- (2) What factors or challenges affect SIV holders' resettlement, as reported by resettlement agencies, SIV holders, and others?
- (3) To what extent have State and HHS helped resettlement agencies and others address SIV holders' resettlement challenges?

To address our first research objective, we examined available data from State and HHS. Specifically, we analyzed individual record-level data from State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) for fiscal year 2011 through the first quarter of fiscal year 2017 (i.e., October 2010 through December 2016) that provide information on recipients of State's resettlement program, the Reception and Placement (R&P)

⁴For purposes of this report, national resettlement agency refers to one of the nine national voluntary resettlement agencies, and local resettlement agency refers to one of their local affiliates.

program.⁵ The R&P information we examined included data on recipients' employment status and other household income sources at 90 days after arrival in the United States. Additionally, we reviewed PRM data on recipients' background characteristics, such as education level and spoken English ability, that PRM collects during the application and screening process prior to an individual's resettlement in the United States. PRM collected both the background and the R&P data in a way that allowed SIV holders to be examined separately from resettled refugees.⁶ We also did analyses with the same variables for resettled refugees from the same general timeframe.⁷ We reviewed the data from PRM for missing data and internal inconsistencies, and interviewed PRM officials knowledgeable about the data to resolve identified issues. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for our purposes of reporting employment rates, income sources, and receipt of services at 90 days, as well as broad categories of education and spoken English levels, for SIV holders and, in some cases, refugees.

We also examined summary-level data from HHS's Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which administers the refugee assistance programs, on the Matching Grant program—the one ORR program that collects information in a way that allowed us to identify outcomes for SIV holders separately from all other program participants. We examined SIV outcome data from ORR for the Matching Grant program for fiscal year

⁵Fiscal year 2011 was the first year of the R&P program's current reporting requirements, and December 2016 was the most current data available at the time of our review. Overall, this timeframe accounted for about 40,000 individual SIV holders (principal SIV holders and their family members) and 14,000 cases or households before we excluded instances of missing data. In our analysis and reported results, we excluded instances of missing data, such as when SIV holders out-migrated from their initial placements before resettlement agencies could collect 90-day outcome information, or, in the case of employment rates, when individuals were considered exempt from seeking employment for various reasons.

⁶SIV holders have a different immigration status than refugees, although these groups receive the same resettlement assistance. Also, some of the background information on SIV holders, including education level and spoken English level, are self-reported and provided on SIV application forms.

⁷PRM provided the most recent available data at the time of each data request, resulting in one additional month of data on refugees.

2016, the only year such data were available.⁸ About one-third of SIV holders participate in the Matching Grant program, which is also available to refugees and other eligible individuals. Matching Grant outcomes, such as whether participants are employed at the end of 6 months or have enough earned income to no longer need cash assistance, are not representative of SIV holders, who may participate in other cash assistance programs, as we discuss further in the report. Based on our review of the data, program and reporting documentation, and interviews and communication with ORR and resettlement agencies, we determined that the 2016 data were sufficiently reliable for our purposes of reporting on the program's employment and self-sufficiency outcome measures for participating SIV holders and for all Matching Grant participants for that fiscal year.

To address our second research objective, we interviewed officials who represent national and local organizations that assist refugees and SIV holders with resettlement, and conducted focus groups with SIV holders. We interviewed officials at all nine national resettlement agencies, and several national advocacy or service provider groups.⁹ We also conducted site visits in three states—California, Texas, and Virginia—which represent the resettlement locations for over half of SIV holders in the country. For each of these states, we interviewed the state's refugee coordinator (or equivalent official) and officials at local resettlement agencies and social service offices in two local areas with high or medium concentrations of SIV holders to better understand factors affecting their

⁸ORR implemented recent improvements to its data systems that allowed ORR to provide outcome data on SIV Matching Grant participants separately from other participants. ORR could not provide such data for any earlier year due to limitations in its prior data collection systems. Although these data are not representative of the SIV population as a whole, they are the only data available on employment outcomes for SIV holders beyond 90 days, and provide some insight into slightly longer-term outcomes than does the PRM data.

⁹The nine national resettlement agencies are Church World Service, Episcopal Migration Ministries, Ethiopian Community Development Council, HIAS, International Rescue Committee, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, U. S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and World Relief. The advocacy and service provider groups we spoke to were International Refugee Assistance Project, Human Rights First, No One Left Behind, and Upwardly Global. We also reached out to several other research or advocacy organizations focused on immigration or immigrants, but their representatives indicated that they did not have specific input on SIV holders.

resettlement.¹⁰ Specifically, we conducted site visits in Oakland and Sacramento, California; Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas; and Arlington and Falls Church, Virginia. Overall, our selected site visit locations varied in median housing costs and the presence of SIV holders from both Afghanistan and Iraq. In each state, we also conducted three to four focus groups with SIV holders (principals and female spouses) to better understand resettlement factors or challenges from their perspectives, conducting a total of 11 focus groups and speaking with a total of 86 participants. (We conducted 8 focus groups with all or mostly male principal SIV holders, and 3 focus groups with primarily female spouses.) We also distributed short anonymous surveys to participants at the end of each focus group. The information gathered from interviews and focus groups conducted on our site visits is not generalizable and is meant to provide illustrative examples.

To address our third research objective, we reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and other agency documentation, and interviewed officials from State's PRM and Consular Affairs, as well as ORR. To assess federal agency efforts, we reviewed program and agency goals, and compared with federal internal control standards. We also asked officials we interviewed from national and local resettlement agencies and other stakeholder groups about their perspectives on federal efforts to address challenges or factors related to SIV holders' resettlement. (For more information on our methodologies for our analysis of State data and on our focus groups with SIV holders, see appendix I.)

We conducted this performance audit from October 2016 through February 2018 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

¹⁰The state of Texas withdrew from the federal refugee resettlement program, effective January 31, 2017, citing security concerns. Federal funding for refugee resettlement is administered by four ORR-designated regional designees in Texas, which are staffed and organized as distinct entities within local resettlement agencies.

Background

SIV Overview

SIV holders become lawful permanent residents upon admission to the United States under one of three special visa programs. The first, created in 2006, is for certain Afghans and Iraqis who have worked directly with U.S. Armed Forces, or under chief of mission authority, for at least one year as translators or interpreters. It is currently capped at 50 visas (excluding spouses and children) per year and is a permanent program.¹¹ The other two SIV programs for certain Iraqis and Afghans who worked for or on behalf of the U.S. government, and as a consequence experienced or are experiencing an ongoing serious threat, have had larger numbers of visas allocated but are temporary in nature and require legislation to extend the programs.¹² The SIV program for Iraqis who worked for or on behalf of the U.S. government stopped accepting new applications after fiscal year 2014.¹³ The SIV program for Afghans who worked for or on behalf of the U.S. government continued to accept new applications as of November 2017, and most recently, was allocated additional visas in December 2017.¹⁴

For all of these SIV programs, prospective special immigrants must go through multiple steps as required by the particular program to which they are applying, such as (1) providing a letter of recommendation from the direct U.S. citizen employment supervisor, (2) a statement describing the threats the applicant has received as a result of his or her U.S. government employment, and (3) forms and documents for all family members applying for visas. Additionally, applicants must have an in-person interview with a consular officer and have fingerprints taken at a U.S. embassy or consular office, among other steps in the process. The

¹¹National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006, Pub. L. No. 109-163, § 1059, 119 Stat. 3136, 3443, as amended.

¹²National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008, Pub. L. No. 110-181, § 1244, 122 Stat. 3, 396, as amended (granting special immigrant status for certain Iraqis); Omnibus Appropriations Act, 2009, Pub. L. No. 111-8, div. F, tit. VI, § 602, 123 Stat. 524, 807, as amended (granting special immigrant status for certain Afghans).

¹³The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2014 limited the number of Iraqis who can be granted SIV status to 2,500 and set an application deadline of not later than September 30, 2014. Pub. L. No. 113-66, § 1218, 127 Stat. 672, 910 (2013).

¹⁴The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018 allocated 3,500 visas for this program, for a total of 14,500 visas allocated since December 19, 2014. Pub. L. No. 115-91, § 1213 (2017).

Iraqi and Afghan SIV application process has been subject to criticism due in part to the length of time it has taken some applications to be processed. Legislation was enacted to require State and the Department of Homeland Security to complete SIV applications within a specified period of time and to report on the efficiency of the application process.¹⁵

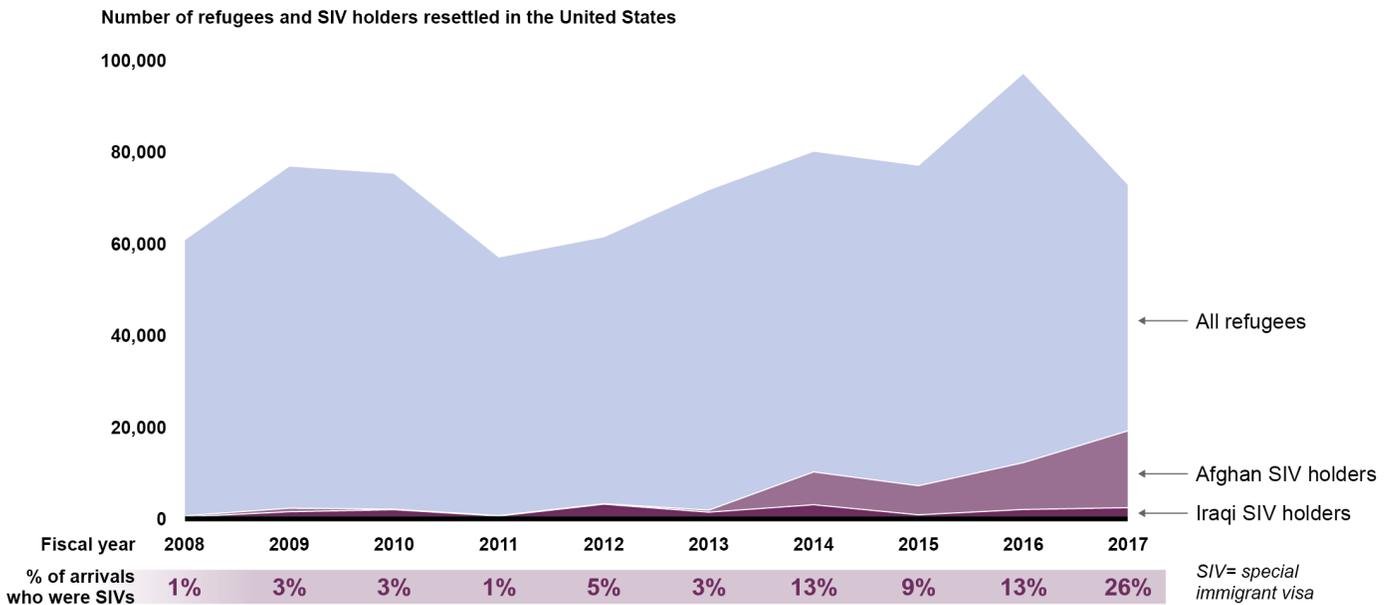
SIV Resettlement in the United States and Resettlement Assistance

Afghan and Iraqi special immigrants are treated like refugees for purposes of federal public assistance, including receipt of resettlement assistance.¹⁶ Over time, SIV holders have accounted for an increasing percent of the total number of individuals receiving resettlement assistance in the United States. SIV holders accounted for about 1 percent of the total number of individuals who received resettlement assistance upon arrival in fiscal year 2008 (the first year they were eligible for this assistance), 13 percent in fiscal year 2016, and about 26 percent in fiscal year 2017, with a reduction that year in total refugee arrivals (see fig. 1).

¹⁵Pub. L. No. 113-66, § 1218, 127 Stat. 911-912. For additional discussion on these issues, see Congressional Research Service, *Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Programs*, R43725 (Washington, D.C.: February 26, 2016).

¹⁶SIV holders' eligibility for federal assistance has changed over time. The 2006 legislation first establishing the special immigrant visa program for Iraqi and Afghan translators did not authorize SIV holders to receive resettlement assistance or federal public benefits, such as those under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or Medicaid. Later legislation authorized SIV holders under the three programs to receive resettlement assistance and public benefits for varying periods of time. See, for example, Pub. L. No. 110-161, div. G, tit. V, § 525, 121 Stat. 1844, 2212 (2007) allowing certain SIV holders to receive resettlement assistance and federal public assistance for up to 6 months. Currently, SIV holders are eligible for the same assistance as refugees, and for the same periods of time. Pub. L. No. 111-118, § 8120, 123 Stat. 3409, 3457 (2009).

Figure 1: Numbers of Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Holders and Refugees Who Received Resettlement Assistance, Fiscal Years 2008 through 2017



Source: GAO analysis of publicly available data from the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. | GAO-18-107

Note: Numbers reflect total individuals (principal applicant, as well as eligible family members) who were admitted into the United States and received resettlement benefits from the Department of State.

During the application process overseas, SIV holders may elect to receive resettlement assistance upon arrival in the United States. If they indicate on their visa application that they have a tie in the United States and would like to be placed nearby, in most cases PRM will do so. SIV holders are then served by the local resettlement agencies in that area. (This is also true for refugees who indicate they have U.S. ties.) Most SIV holders travel to the United States in the same way as refugees, with travel booked by the International Organization for Migration (an inter-governmental organization). In this case, resettlement agencies know in advance of SIV holders' arrival. However, some SIV holders elect to book their own travel to the United States for various reasons, such as when they may be in immediate danger in their home countries.¹⁷ These SIV

¹⁷Another reason that SIV holders book their own travel can be because their visas may expire before the International Organization for Migration is able to complete the necessary steps to arrange travel, according to PRM officials.

holders must contact a local resettlement agency as soon as possible after they arrive to receive initial resettlement assistance through the R&P program, generally within 30 days of arrival.¹⁸ SIV holders who arrange their own travel and elect to receive resettlement assistance after they arrive in the United States are often known by resettlement agencies as walk-in SIV holders.

Various federal programs provide resettlement assistance for which SIV holders are eligible (see table 1). The R&P program provides initial resettlement assistance for the first 30 to 90 days and is administered through agreements PRM has with the nine national resettlement agencies and their network of local resettlement agencies. The R&P cooperative agreement outlines what resettlement agencies must do for a newly arrived individual or family, including picking up people at the airport; providing initial housing, furniture, food, and clothing; helping children enroll in school or adults enroll in language programs; and developing a resettlement plan, which focuses on early employment for employable adults. Under the R&P agreement, PRM provides a fixed per capita grant to national resettlement agencies for individuals served (\$2,075 in fiscal year 2017), of which a specified amount must be given in cash or spent directly on each individual served through the R&P program (\$925 in fiscal year 2017). These grant amounts and standards are the same nationally.

¹⁸Prior to 2014, SIV holders who arranged their own travel were not eligible for R&P resettlement assistance. SIV holders may be eligible for ORR benefits and services past 30 days after arrival.

Table 1: Selected Refugee Resettlement Programs Overseen by Department of State (State) and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Percent of Program Participants Who Were Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Holders

Federal Agency	Federal Resettlement Program	Administering Entities	Length of Time Assistance Provided	Federal Obligations Fiscal Year 2016 (million)	Percent of SIV Holders as Total Fiscal Year 2016 Caseload
State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM)	Reception and Placement Program	Nine national resettlement agencies	Up to 90 days after arrival	\$228	13 percent
HHS' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR)	Matching Grant Program	Nine national resettlement agencies	Up to 180 days	\$76	8 percent across all ORR refugee resettlement programs
HHS/ORR	Refugee Cash and Medical Assistance	Refugee coordinator or equivalent in each state	Up to 8 months	\$410	
HHS/ORR	Social Services and Targeted Assistance	Refugee coordinator or equivalent in each state	Up to 5 years	\$170 ^a	

Source: GAO presentation of Information from PRM and ORR. | GAO-18-107

^aThe amounts for Social Services and Targeted Assistance include funding allocated on a formula basis only. Also, the amount for Social Services reflects the base funding amount and does not include set-asides.

ORR's programs generally provide short-term assistance after the initial resettlement period. Several of ORR's key refugee assistance programs, such as cash and medical assistance and social services,¹⁹ are administered through grants to refugee coordinators (or equivalent) in each state.²⁰ These coordinators are, in many cases, staffed by state agencies (e.g., departments of social services), but in some cases are staffed by private organizations. At the local level, service providers may be county social services offices, local affiliates of the nine national resettlement agencies, or other community service providers. In contrast, ORR's Matching Grant program is administered through the national resettlement agencies and not the state refugee coordinators. This program provides cash assistance, employment services, and case

¹⁹Social services include English language, social adjustment, child care, citizenship, and case management.

²⁰This excludes Wyoming, which does not administer any ORR refugee resettlement assistance.

management for up to 6 months.²¹ In some cases a household also may receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Medicaid instead of refugee cash and medical assistance, depending on state eligibility rules and the characteristics of any given household. In addition, because SIV holders, like refugees, are eligible to receive public benefits, they may also be eligible for other types of assistance, such as food assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Available Data Provide Limited Information on SIV Holders' Short-Term Outcomes and No Information on Long-Term Outcomes

Limited data from PRM from fiscal year 2011 through part of fiscal year 2017 showed that most principal SIV holders were unemployed and relied on cash assistance for income 90 days after arrival to the United States. Available data from ORR for one of its programs, the Matching Grant program, provide slightly longer-term information, but only cover a portion of SIV holders and are not representative. ORR's Matching Grant data for fiscal year 2016 (the only year available) showed that most SIV holders were employed 6 months after arrival and no longer reliant on cash assistance. Although ORR regularly surveys the general refugee population up to 5 years after resettlement in order to examine their longer-term outcomes, it has never surveyed SIV holders for such information.

²¹For more information on refugee resettlement assistance programs, see GAO, *Refugee Resettlement: Greater Consultation with Community Stakeholders Could Strengthen Program*, [GAO-12-729](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 25, 2012), and GAO, *Refugee Assistance: Little Is Known about the Effectiveness of Different Approaches for Improving Refugees' Employment Outcomes*, [GAO-11-369](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 31, 2011).

Limited State Department
Data Collected 90 Days
After Arrival Showed the
Majority of Principal SIV
Holders Were
Unemployed

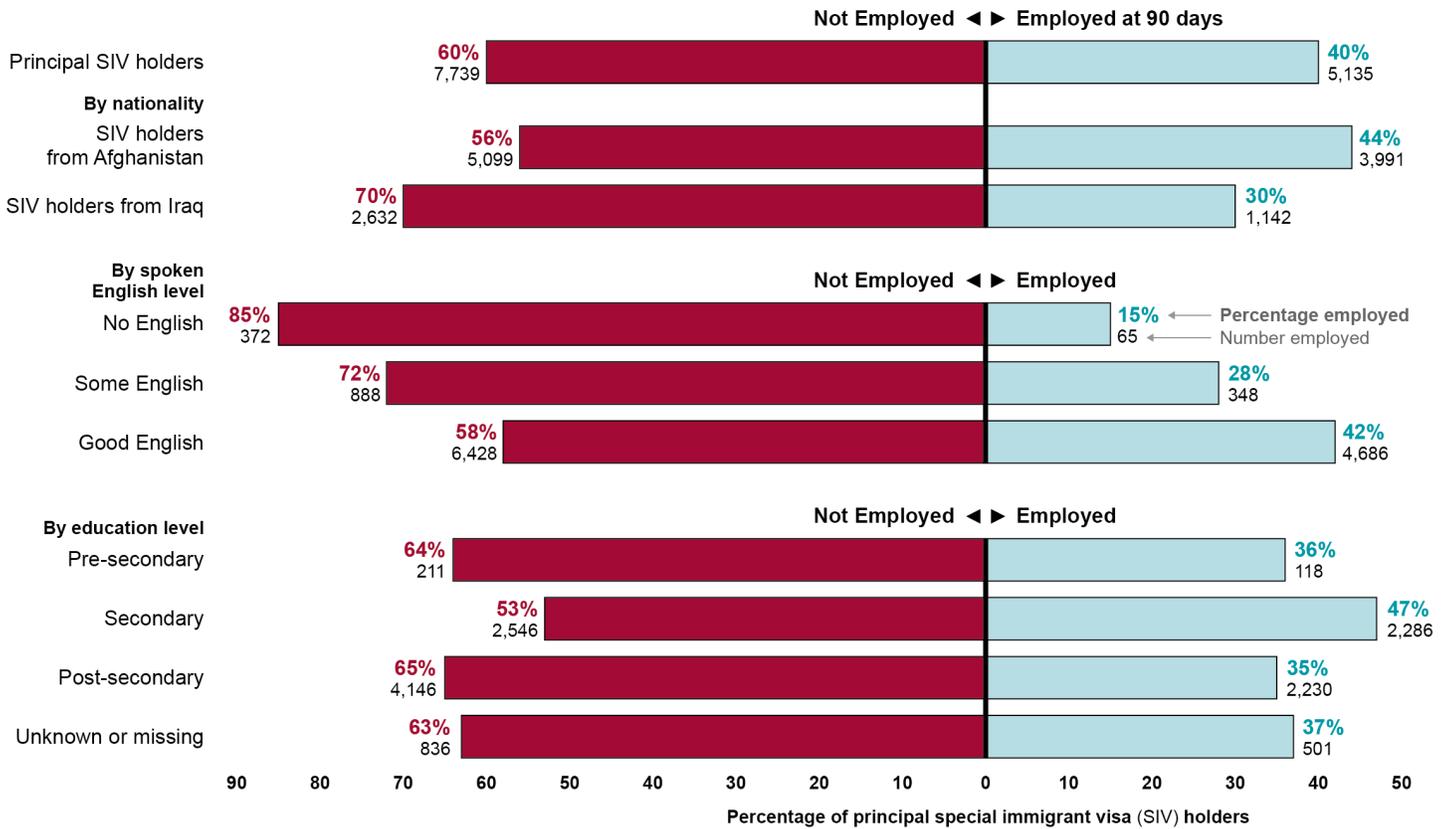
About 60 percent of all principal SIV holders participating in the R&P program who arrived to the United States in fiscal years 2011 through the first quarter of 2017 were unemployed 90 days after arriving, according to data that PRM collects from resettlement agencies on R&P recipients. Based on our analyses of these data, principal SIV holders from Iraq tended to be unemployed at somewhat higher rates than those from Afghanistan.²² With respect to English speaking skills, the majority who reported their level of spoken English as “good” were unemployed, though they had considerably higher employment rates at 90 days than those reporting English levels of “some” or “none.”²³ In contrast, employment rates were relatively comparable among principal SIV holders with different levels of education, although those with post-secondary levels of education had somewhat lower employment than those at the secondary level (see fig. 2).²⁴

²²The unemployment rate for principal SIV holders from Afghanistan saw an overall decrease between fiscal year 2011 (74 percent) and the first quarter of fiscal year 2017 (62 percent), and was lower than the unemployment rate of those from Iraq every year other than fiscal year 2011. In the years we reviewed, Afghan unemployment rates were the lowest in fiscal year 2015 (50 percent), whereas the Iraqi group saw their lowest unemployment rate in 2016 (64 percent).

²³Spoken English levels are self-reported on SIV application forms, where people selected from one of these options: “Good,” “Some,” or “None.”

²⁴For the purposes of our analysis, we defined secondary education as having completed high school, while post-secondary education is defined as completing education beyond high school, including technical school, a 4-year college, or graduate level education.

Figure 2: Principal Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Holders' Employment 90 Days after Arrival, by Nationality, Education Level, and Language Proficiency, Cumulative for Fiscal Years 2011 through First Quarter 2017



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration data. | GAO-18-107

Note: This analysis includes about 13,000 principal SIV holders. Due to missing responses, it excludes principals who migrated from their initial placement sites within their first 90 days, as well as those who were considered exempt from finding employment due to health or other specified reasons. Spoken English and education level data are self-reported by SIV holders on their application form. To report their spoken English level, a required field, SIV holders could select one of these options: "Good," "Some," or "None." Less than 1 percent of principal SIV holders had their English level identified as unknown by application reviewers, which is not shown in the figure. To report their education level, an optional field, SIV holders' responses were sorted by application reviewers into one of nine options, which were further combined into broader categories for our analysis: Primary, Kindergarten, or Intermediate (combined here as Pre-Secondary); Secondary; or Pre-University, Technical School, University/College, Graduate School, and Professional (combined here as Post-Secondary). A portion of principal SIV holders did not report their education level; those responses are combined with "unknown" responses in the figure.

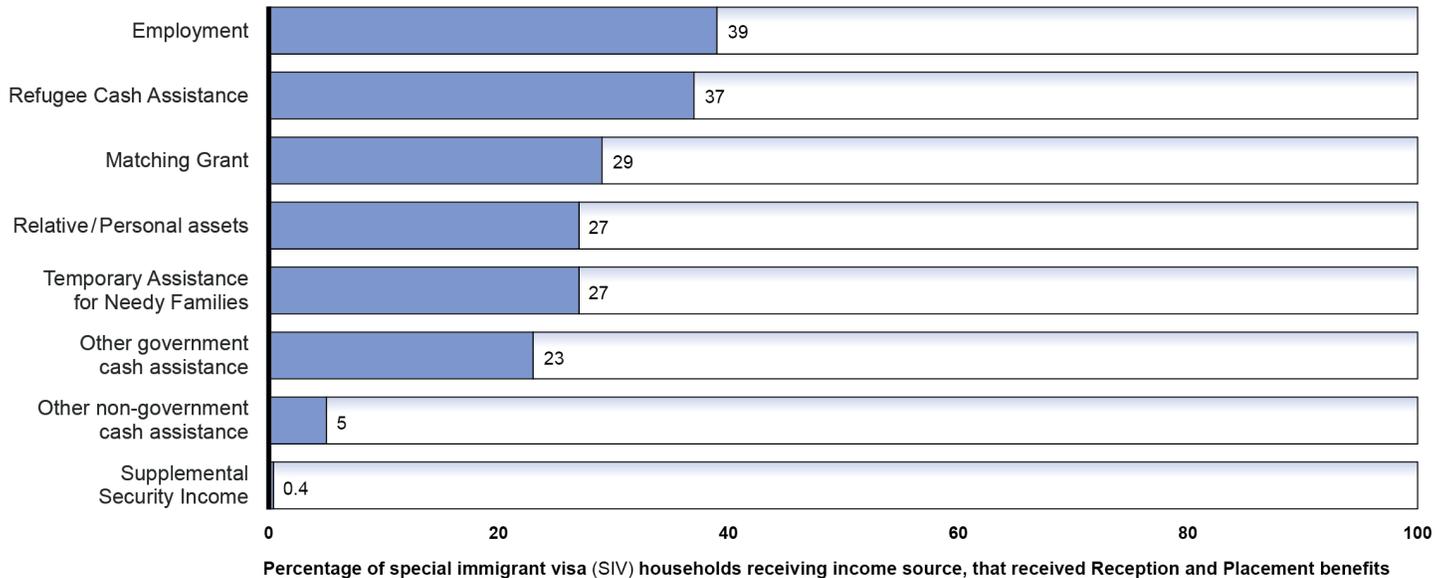
Additionally, almost all SIV households relied on cash assistance at 90 days in order to cover expenses such as housing costs.²⁵ Even among households that had earnings from employment, most also relied on some form of cash assistance, according to our analysis of the R&P data.²⁶ Of those SIV households receiving earnings from employment, 89 percent were also receiving income through Refugee Cash Assistance, Matching Grant, or TANF programs, which is slightly higher than the rate of the overall refugee population who received one of these types of cash assistance (82 percent). These were the most common types of cash assistance that SIV households received, with slightly less than a third also relying on personal assets (see fig. 3).²⁷

²⁵A household, or R&P case, generally consists of the principal SIV holder and his/her eligible family members who were also admitted to the United States as SIV holders.

²⁶Cash assistance programs have different benefit periods: Matching Grant benefits are available for up to 6 months; Refugee Cash Assistance is available for up to 8 months; TANF may provide cash assistance for up to 5 years. Generally, one household could only receive one of these sources of cash assistance.

²⁷Refugees received the various types of cash assistance at rates comparable to or slightly lower than the SIV population.

Figure 3: Percent of Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Households Receiving Each Type of Income 90 Days after Arrival, Cumulative for Fiscal Years 2011 through First Quarter 2017



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration data. | GAO-18-107

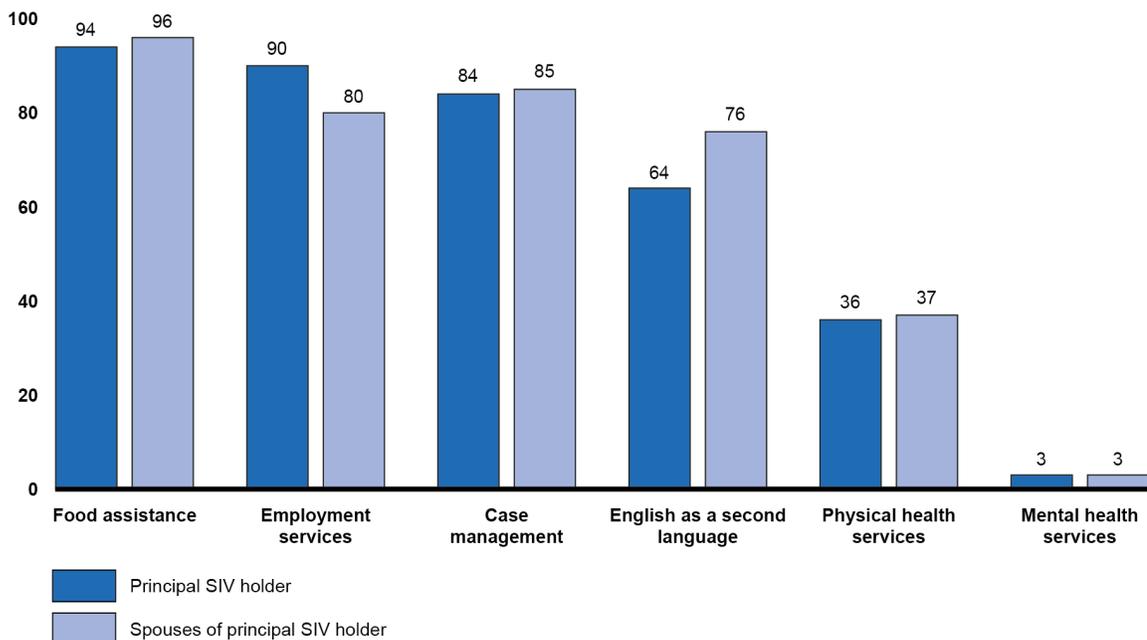
Note: These percentages are based on a total of about 13,000 SIV households, excluding households that migrated from their initial placement site within their first 90 days due to missing responses. Households, or cases, are generally the principal SIV holder and his/her eligible family members who were also admitted to the United States under the visa. SIV households may receive income from more than one source; accordingly, the percentages do not add up to 100 percent. Also, the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration's (PRM) prior reporting requirements permitted reporting Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Refugee Cash Assistance, or Matching Grant without specifying which source. Two percent of households reported having this combined income source, which is not shown above. Additionally, other government cash assistance refers to any federal, state, county, or local government cash assistance aside from Refugee Cash Assistance, Matching Grant, or TANF.

SIV holders also received non-cash assistance and services within 90 days of arrival, based on our analysis of the R&P data. For example, nearly all SIV households received food assistance, the most common type of non-cash assistance. Other common forms of assistance include employment services and case management, which were provided to both principal SIV holders and spouses (mostly wives) at comparable rates (see fig. 4). To a lesser degree, principal SIV holders and spouses

also received health services and access to English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, among other types of assistance.²⁸

Figure 4: Ongoing Services Received by Principal Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Holders and Spouses 90 Days after Arrival, Cumulative for Fiscal Years 2011 through First Quarter 2017

Percentage of principal special immigrant visa (SIV) holders or spouses who received Reception and Placement benefits



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration data. | GAO-18-107

Note: These percentages are based on a total of about 13,000 principal SIV holders and about 8,000 spouses, and these totals exclude principal SIV holders and spouses who migrated from their initial placement site within their first 90 days. These percentages do not add up to 100 percent as people may receive more than one type of service or assistance. Also, dependent children are likely to receive services, such as food assistance or case management; however, the rates of which children receive services are not depicted in this figure.

²⁸The R&P Cooperative Agreement between PRM and resettlement agencies requires that various core services are provided within the initial resettlement period. For example, within 10 days of arrival, clients are to be enrolled in English language programs and employment services, as appropriate, and resettlement agencies are to develop a resettlement service plan with each individual client during the first 30 days after arrival.

SIV Holders Compared to Refugee Population: Education and English Levels

Our analysis of Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) data for fiscal years 2011 through the first quarter of 2017 showed that principal special immigrant visa (SIV) holders mostly had higher reported levels of education and spoken English compared with principal applicants in the overall population of resettled refugees, and compared with resettled refugees who shared a country of origin with SIV holders (Afghanistan or Iraq), with some exceptions. For example:

- **Principal SIV holders reported higher levels of education and better spoken English than refugees overall.** About 87 percent of principal SIV holders reported completing secondary education or higher compared to 49 percent of all refugees. Also, 86 percent of SIV holders reported their level of spoken English as good compared to 8 percent of all refugees.
- **When compared to refugees from the same countries, principal SIV holders reported higher levels of education and better spoken English, with some exceptions among Iraqi refugees.**
 - Afghan SIV holders reported higher levels of education (90 percent reported having completed secondary education or higher) and better spoken English (89 percent reported their spoken English as good) than Afghan refugees (38 percent and 10 percent for those categories, respectively).
 - Iraqi SIV holders generally reported higher levels of education (80 percent reported having completed secondary education or higher) and better spoken English (80 percent reported their spoken English as good) than Iraqi refugees overall (62 percent and 15 percent for those categories, respectively).
 - However, there was some variation within the Iraqi refugee population. Iraqi Priority 2 refugees—many of whom worked for or were associated with the U.S. government as interpreters or in other roles—had lower levels of spoken English than their SIV counterparts (21 percent with spoken English as good). However, regarding education, Iraqi Priority 2 refugees were more comparable to the SIV group than the overall Iraqi refugee population, with 70 percent of Iraqi Priority 2 refugees having completed secondary education or higher.

SIV Holders Compared to Refugee Population: Employment Rates 90 Days After Arrival

Our analysis of the PRM data showed that principal SIV holders' employment rates 90 days after arrival to the United States are similar to or higher than principal applicants in the overall population of resettled refugees, though with some variations among SIV holders and refugees from the same country (Afghanistan or Iraq). For example:

- **Overall principal SIV holders were employed at comparable rates to refugees with similar education and English levels.** Both SIV holders and refugees reporting their spoken English as good or with secondary education or higher, were employed about 40 percent of the time.
- **When compared to refugees from the same countries, principal SIV holders and refugees reporting good levels of spoken English had comparable employment rates, but SIV holders had higher employment rates than refugees with similar education levels.**
 - About 46 percent of Afghan SIV holders and refugees reporting good levels of spoken English were employed; however 44 percent of Afghan SIV holders reporting secondary or higher education were employed, compared to 33 percent of Afghan refugees with similar education.
 - About 30 percent of Iraqi SIV holders and Iraqi Priority 2 refugees reporting good levels of spoken English were employed, though Iraqi SIV holders reporting secondary or higher education had a slightly higher employment rate (30 percent compared to 23 percent of Iraqi Priority 2 refugees).

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration data. | GAO-18-107

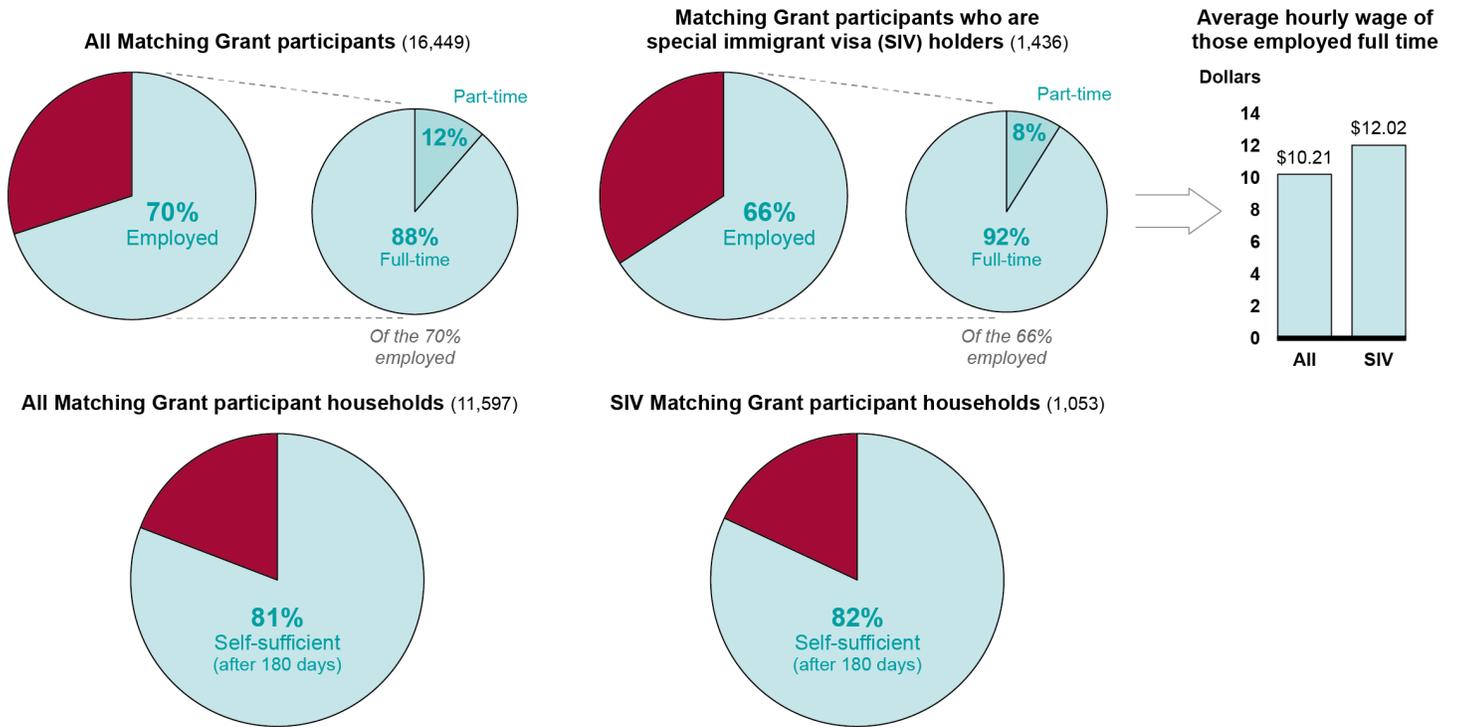
HHS Data on About One-Third of SIV Holders Show Most Are Employed 6 Months After Arrival, but Federal Agencies Do Not Collect Longer-Term Data

The most recent data from the Matching Grant program, which is one cash assistance program in which selected SIV holders might participate during and after their initial 90 days in the United States, and the one such ORR program for which SIV outcomes could be identified, showed that the majority of SIV program participants were employed and no longer relying on cash assistance at end of the 180 day (or 6 month) benefit period.²⁹ Specifically, about two-thirds of SIV holders in the Matching Grant program were employed at 180 days, a rate slightly lower than the rate for all Matching Grant participants, which include refugees, asylees, and other specified groups, according to data for fiscal year 2016 (see fig. 5). However, SIV holder participants had slightly higher rates of full-time employment and a slightly higher average wage of about \$12 per hour compared with all Matching Grant participants. The relatively low wages may reflect, among other contributing factors, the general need for Matching Grant participants to accept the first available employment opportunity, including entry level jobs, as a requirement of the program and the length of the program, which ends at 180 days. About 80 percent of participating SIV households, as well as all participating households in the Matching Grant program in fiscal year 2016, were considered “self-sufficient,” defined by the program as having sufficient earnings to cover basic expenses without the need for cash assistance.³⁰

²⁹ORR was able to provide Matching Grant outcome information for those with SIVs specifically for fiscal year 2016, due to recent improvements in its data collection system, but was not able to identify SIV-specific data for prior fiscal years.

³⁰Throughout this report, the term “household” is used to refer to a case. In order to be enrolled in the Matching Grant program, there must be at least one employable adult in the household, the household composition must meet the definition of the respective state welfare agencies, and all members of the case must have the same date of eligibility. About 20 percent of participating SIV households in the Matching Grant program were not considered self-sufficient after 180 days in 2016. Of this 20 percent, some households may have stopped participating in the program before this time, while others may simply not have had sufficient earnings to cover expenses at 180 days. Regardless of self-sufficiency attainment, all participating households no longer receive this cash assistance after 180 days.

Figure 5: Employment Outcomes at 180 Days for Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Holder Matching Grant Participants and All Matching Grant Participants, Fiscal Year 2016



Source: GAO analysis of Matching Grant data from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement. | GAO-18-107

Note: The total numbers in the top row of this figure show the number of employable individuals receiving Matching Grant benefits who are employed, and could include multiple individuals from the same household.

About one-third of SIV households overall participate in the Matching Grant program. Findings on SIV holders participating in this program are not representative of all SIV holders, given program design elements.³¹ For instance, the Matching Grant program has limited enrollment slots, and resettlement agencies may have an incentive to select more “employable” candidates. In contrast, Refugee Cash Assistance and TANF, the other main cash assistance programs in which SIV holders may participate, generally serve all eligible clients based on income and other eligibility requirements. Additionally, unlike Refugee Cash Assistance or TANF, the benefit amount for the Matching Grant program

³¹For additional information on the differences between the Matching Grant program and ORR’s other refugee cash assistance programs, see [GAO-11-369](#).

is generally not reduced or terminated based on earnings, which may create additional incentives to find work and potentially increase the likelihood of employment at 90 days for Matching Grant participants.³² Our analysis of PRM's data from the R&P program show that principal SIV holders participating in the Matching Grant program have a higher employment rate 90 days after arrival than those receiving cash assistance from ORR's Refugee Cash Assistance program or state TANF programs.³³

Additionally, although Matching Grant data provide some additional information beyond what is collected for the R&P program, the data still provide relatively limited insight on individuals' employment and other outcomes. First, the Matching Grant data are collected at 6 months after arrival, which is a few months beyond the 90-day reporting period for the R&P program. The focus on 6-month outcomes aligns with the Matching Grant program's goal of immediate self-sufficiency and employment before the end of cash assistance; however, the short timeframe precludes any understanding of participants' progress in job security, wage growth, or career advancement over the longer-term.³⁴ Second, while the Matching Grant data do include information on full-time or part-

³²Further, benefit programs and their requirements can vary by state, which may affect which program SIV holders elect to join. For example, resettlement agency officials in California told us that far fewer SIV holders opt to participate in the Matching Grant program in their state because the state's TANF benefits can be more generous. In contrast, SIV holders (or refugees) are generally not eligible for TANF in Texas, according to state and local officials we interviewed, given the eligibility requirements of the state's TANF program. Such differences were reflected in our analysis of PRM's data, which showed that almost 50 percent of SIV holders in California received TANF, while 34 percent received Refugee Cash Assistance, and only 12 percent received Matching Grant. In contrast, SIV holders in Texas most commonly received Refugee Cash Assistance (61 percent), followed by Matching Grant (35 percent), and TANF (less than 1 percent).

³³Unlike the Matching Grant program, TANF and Refugee Cash Assistance programs are run at the state level, and outcome data broken out by those with SIVs were not available from these programs, based on our interviews with our three selected states.

³⁴In [GAO-12-729](#), we reported on how ORR's focus on short-term outcomes for its major cash assistance programs can create disincentives for service providers to help clients obtain longer-term services and training, such as vocational training, which could significantly boost their income in the long term. We recommended ORR consider incorporating longer-term goals into its performance measures. Specifically, we recommended that HHS examine ORR's performance measures to consider creating incentives for service providers to work toward longer-term goals, such as career advancement. HHS agreed with this recommendation, but ultimately did not implement it. ORR officials, in their explanation for not implementing this recommendation, said they were not able to consider longer-term goals given recent increases in refugee arrivals without additional resources.

time employment status and average wage—information not captured in the R&P data—they do not provide information on type of employment, career or wage progression, or the amount earnings exceed expenses for those households considered self-sufficient. Moreover, ORR’s guidelines for the Matching Grant program encourage resettlement agencies to work with participants with specialized, advanced skills or vocations who have been placed in entry-level work to obtain job upgrades or recertification programs as appropriate. However, ORR does not collect any information on the extent that this occurs or results in positive employment outcomes, such as wage increases.

While ORR’s program data focus on short-term self-sufficiency, ORR regularly gathers information on the longer-term outcomes of the general refugee population through its Annual Survey of Refugees. ORR conducts its Annual Survey of Refugees to comply with a statutory reporting requirement.³⁵ It also uses its annual survey to provide Congress and the public information as to whether refugees are successfully resettling in the United States through its programs, in line with the agency’s overall mission to link the populations it serves to the right resources to help them become successfully assimilated members of American society over the longer term. The survey provides information on a sample of refugees each year after resettlement in the United States, up to 5 years. It reports on a range of outcomes, including wage progression, educational attainment, home ownership, and the receipt of public assistance (including non-cash assistance), among other things. Although ORR has typically surveyed the refugee population overall, it has in previous years used its annual survey to conduct supplements on special populations, including Iraqi refugees, Hmong refugees, and the Lost Boys of Sudan. These populations were selected based on ORR leadership’s policy priorities and their inclusion in the survey, through the use of oversampling techniques, was cost-neutral, according to ORR officials.

ORR, however, has never used its Annual Survey of Refugees to examine long-term outcomes for SIV holders. HHS, in October 2017, awarded a research contract focused on redesigning its Annual Survey of

³⁵Section 413 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (8 U.S.C. § 1523) requires the Secretary of Health and Human Services to submit an annual report to the House and Senate Judiciary Committees that contains an updated profile of the employment and labor force statistics for refugees who have entered the United States within the 5 fiscal-year period immediately preceding the fiscal year in which the report is made.

Refugees, the first such redesign since 1993. The goal of this effort is to better understand medium- to long-term resettlement outcomes for refugees and related populations through improved data collection, but the contract does not mention examining the outcomes of any special populations, such as SIV holders. Agency officials stated that ORR plans to explore potential costs and benefits of including special populations (such as SIV holders) in its survey redesign efforts. However, at the time of our review, ORR officials did not yet know whether such an effort would be cost neutral, as with other prior efforts examining special populations; and if not, whether they could obtain long-term outcome information about SIV holders through future surveys or in other ways.

Standards for Internal Control state that management needs quality information to make decisions and achieve its objectives.³⁶ Accordingly, one of ORR's policy objectives is to improve data collection in order to make data-driven decisions to better support the populations it serves.³⁷ Similarly, a primary goal of HHS' redesign of the Annual Survey of Refugees is to maximize the effectiveness of ORR's policies and programs in promoting successful integration for its populations. Without longer-term data or other in-depth research, neither ORR nor policymakers have information as to whether SIV holders have progressed beyond the immediate goal of basic self-sufficiency toward improved economic security and cultural integration over the longer term.

³⁶GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

³⁷HHS Administration for Children and Families, *Annual Report to Congress: Office of Refugee Resettlement, Fiscal Year 2015* (Washington, D.C.: 2015), accessed August 2017, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/office-of-refugee-resettlement-annual-report-to-congress-2015>.

Reported Challenges Include the Capacity of Resettlement Agencies in Certain Locations, Barriers to Skilled Employment, and Housing

SIV holders faced a variety of challenges while resettling in the United States, according to representatives of 13 local resettlement agencies we interviewed and SIV holders who participated in 11 focus groups. Among local resettlement agencies, the two in Northern Virginia reported significant challenges with their capacity to assist the large numbers of SIV holders in the area, while agencies in other locations we visited reported fewer capacity challenges. SIV holders also experienced challenges finding skilled employment, which did not align with their expectations of resettlement in the United States. Additionally, securing affordable and suitable housing, and female spouses' assimilation to U.S. culture were reported challenges. Officials we interviewed from some resettlement agencies reported taking steps to address some of these issues.

Large Numbers of SIV Holders Created Capacity Challenges for Resettlement Agencies in Northern Virginia

Of the 13 local resettlement agencies in three states at which we interviewed officials, officials from the 2 agencies in Northern Virginia reported the greatest impact from high numbers of SIV holders, creating capacity challenges at both local resettlement agencies as well as in the community.³⁸ The number of SIV holders in the Northern Virginia area increased more than tenfold since fiscal year 2013 and almost doubled from fiscal years 2015 through 2016, according to data provided by Virginia's state refugee coordinator. Officials from one of the two local resettlement agencies in Northern Virginia reported that SIV holders also increased as a percentage of their total caseload in recent years, and now make up almost 90 percent. In addition to large numbers of SIV holders scheduled to arrive at local resettlement agencies, many also arrived as walk-ins, which meant the agencies could not predict how

³⁸In our prior work on refugee resettlement assistance ([GAO-12-729](#)), we reported on challenges faced by schools and community providers when needing to serve large numbers of refugee arrivals. To address these challenges, we recommended that State provide additional guidance to resettlement agencies and state coordinators on how to consult with local stakeholders prior to making placement decisions, and that State and HHS collect and disseminate best practices related to refugee placement decisions, specifically on working with community stakeholders. These recommendations were implemented.

many individuals they would need to assist at a given time, according to Virginia's state refugee coordinator.³⁹

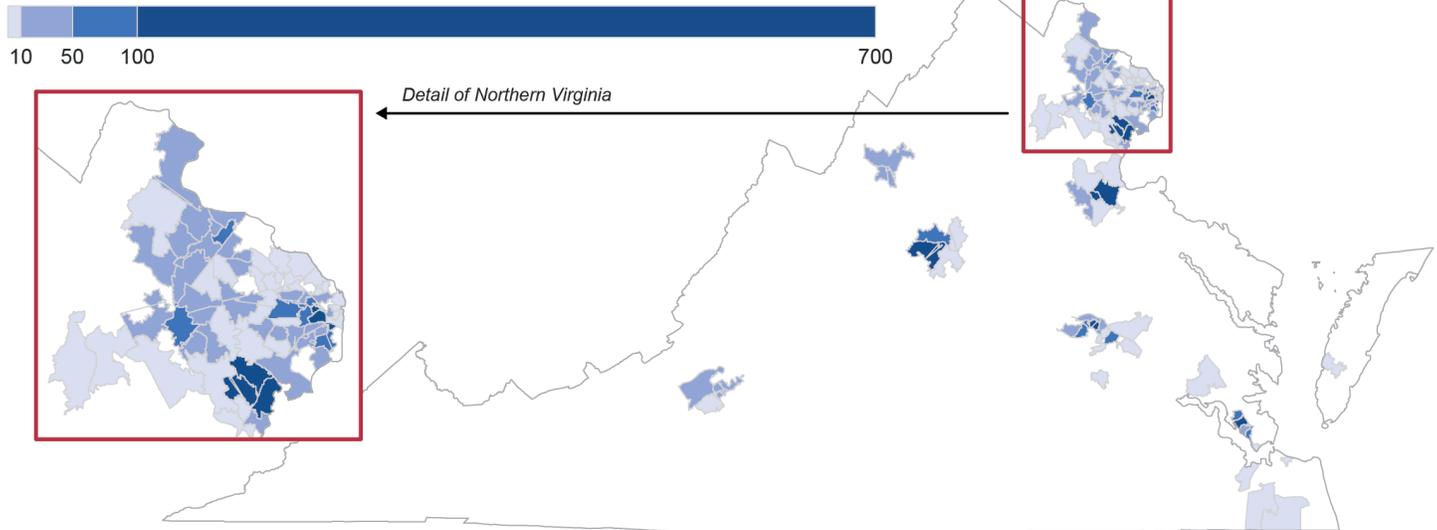
Both of the Northern Virginia local resettlement agencies reported challenges related to capacity. Staff from one agency said that a case manager would normally have three to four families a month to resettle but now might regularly be dealing with five families in a week and, in an extreme case, 70 families in a month. The large influx created great challenges in finding affordable housing for SIV holders, according to staff from the two agencies, especially because the area has one of the most expensive housing costs in the state (see fig. 6). Additionally, officials from the agencies and Virginia's state refugee coordinator reported that the influx caused significant delays in getting SIV holders needed social services, such as health screenings for children, which then resulted in school enrollment delays.⁴⁰ Due to the significant increase in SIV holder arrivals, two national resettlement agencies opened temporary offices in the area under PRM's approval and encouragement.

³⁹As previously described, SIV "walk-ins" travel to the United States on their own and then walk into a local resettlement agency and request services. Virginia's proportion of SIV holder walk-ins was slightly above the national average of 22 percent from fiscal year 2014 to the first quarter of fiscal year 2017, according to our analysis of PRM data.

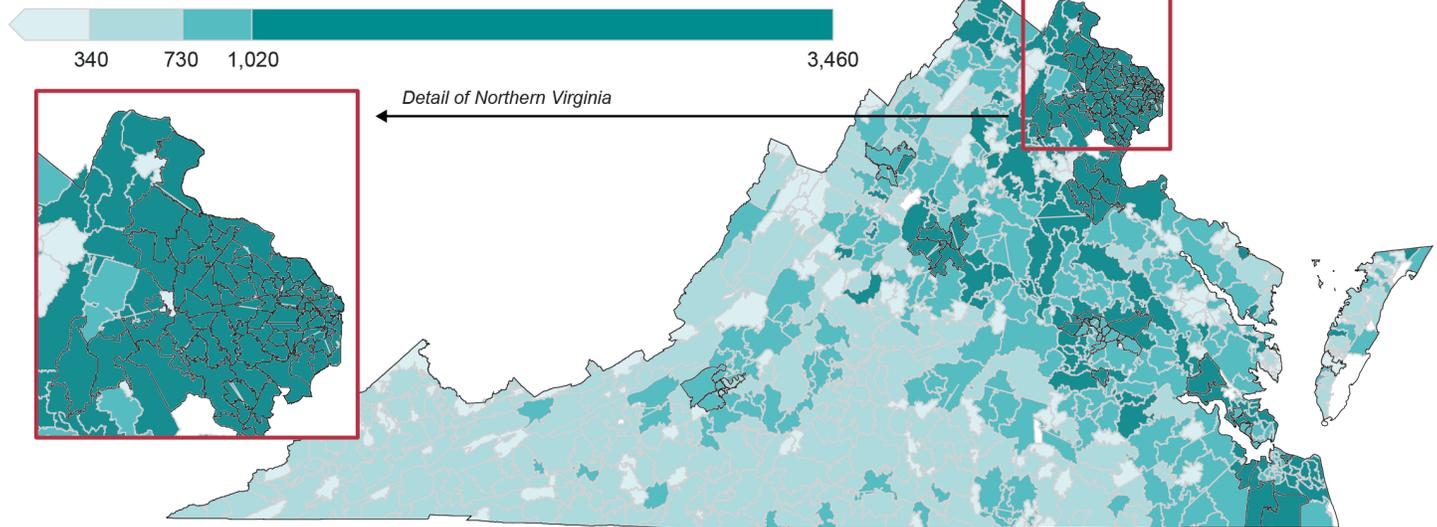
⁴⁰According to our analysis of PRM data, delays in health screenings were the most common reason for initial services not being met on time.

Figure 6: Numbers of Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Holders Who Resettled in Virginia and Median Gross Rent in Those Areas

Cumulative number of special immigrant visa (SIV) holders
Fiscal years 2014 through first quarter 2017



Median monthly gross rent (in dollars) Estimated for 5-year period of 2011-2015



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration data and U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey data. | GAO-18-107

SIV holders may have originally been drawn to Northern Virginia by the hope of finding work at nearby federal government offices, according to officials from one national resettlement agency and one local resettlement agency. Local resettlement agency staff added that over time, SIV holders may have moved to the area to be near an established

community of SIV holders. According to PRM data, 83 percent of SIV holder cases in Virginia reported having U.S. ties, although 66 percent of these were ties to friends (not relatives). In all three focus groups conducted in Northern Virginia, SIV holders reported that their U.S. ties were sometimes distant friends or acquaintances who were helpful in the resettlement process, including with providing transportation and navigating life in the United States.

Officials from local resettlement agencies in other areas we visited expressed fewer capacity challenges. In Sacramento, officials from the three local resettlement agencies and a local service provider reported that they faced some capacity challenges, as their local area had among the highest number of SIV holder arrivals in the United States, according to our analysis of PRM data. However, so far officials we interviewed in Sacramento reported that have been able to find ways to manage service provision to address the high caseloads.⁴¹ For instance, to address rising housing costs and difficulties securing affordable housing, officials from one local resettlement agency reported that they started securing housing farther from the central SIV holder community, although this was not always preferred by SIV holders they resettled. Officials from Sacramento County's health department said to address backlogs for health screenings caused by increased SIV holder arrivals, they increased the number of full-time staff. In addition, Sacramento, when compared with Northern Virginia, had more local resettlement agencies to manage arrivals (four versus two), which may have helped local agencies address capacity challenges. In the Dallas/Fort Worth area, officials we interviewed from all six local resettlement agencies reported no significant capacity challenges with respect to resettling SIV holders. These six agencies had fewer SIV holder arrivals, and SIV holders represented a smaller percentage of their total caseload than other sites we visited.⁴² Generally, securing affordable housing that meets requirements was not reported as a major challenge, although housing prices were rising in

⁴¹Based on PRM data, the number of SIV holders in Sacramento steadily increased since fiscal year 2013, when there were 50 SIV holder arrivals, to about 2,000 in fiscal year 2016. Officials from two local resettlement agencies in Sacramento reported that SIV holders also increased as a percentage of their total caseload since 2013, with SIV holders now making up 90 to 100 percent of their caseload.

⁴²Arrival numbers were based on PRM data from fiscal years 2013 through 2016. Also, officials from the local resettlement agencies we interviewed reported that SIV holders made up about 10-40 percent of the caseload among Dallas/Fort Worth resettlement agencies, compared to 70-100 percent in most of the Northern Virginia and Sacramento resettlement agencies we visited.

Dallas, according to local resettlement agency staff and the Dallas/Fort Worth regional designee.⁴³

SIV Holders Experienced Barriers to High-Skilled Employment, Which Did Not Align with Their Expectations of Resettlement

According to officials from national and local resettlement agencies, officials from advocacy groups, and SIV holder participants in all 8 focus groups conducted with principal SIV holders, principal SIV holders faced challenges obtaining employment in their previous fields or that matched their skill level. These challenges occurred even though they had worked for the U.S. government, tended to have completed secondary education or more, and reported good levels of spoken English. Several factors may account for these challenges, some of which may also be applicable to skilled refugees or immigrants who are not SIV holders. These include:

- *Limited opportunities for federal employment in the United States:* SIV holders had limited opportunities for federal employment because most positions required U.S. citizenship as well as background investigations or security clearances that are available only to citizens, as we reported in 2010.⁴⁴ In 6 of the 8 focus groups we conducted with principal SIV holders, some participants said that they expected to be able to get jobs similar to the ones they had in Afghanistan or Iraq, such as with the federal government, because they had previously worked for U.S. organizations. Based on the surveys they completed at the end of our focus groups, principal SIV holders reported that they had a range of jobs in Afghanistan and Iraq, including interpreter, information technology worker, security guard, project manager, and engineer.⁴⁵ In one of our focus groups conducted in Northern Virginia, some participants expressed frustration with being ineligible for security clearances for federal employment in the United States because they were able to obtain

⁴³As mentioned earlier, as a result of the state of Texas's withdrawal from the federal refugee resettlement program, federal funding for refugee resettlement is administered by four ORR-designated regional offices in Texas, which are staffed and organized as distinct entities within local resettlement agencies.

⁴⁴GAO, *Iraq: Iraqi Refugees and Special Immigrant Visa Holders Face Challenges Resettling in the United States and Obtaining U.S. Government Employment*, [GAO-10-274](#) (Washington, D.C.: March 9, 2010).

⁴⁵Additionally, we analyzed available PRM data and found that the top categories of principal SIV holders' prior occupations that we were able to identify were interpreter/translator (the largest by far), managerial, engineer-related, and security-related. These categories are rough estimates based on grouping self-reported, open-ended responses using common search words. Also, the reported occupations may or may not have been what qualified principal SIV holders for their visa.

clearance to work in Afghanistan, and they now had to wait 5 years to apply for U.S. citizenship, which is required for a U.S. security clearance.

- *SIV holders' previous work may not help with U.S. employment:* Some officials we interviewed from advocacy groups and local resettlement agencies said that while principal SIV holders' ability to speak English with a high level of proficiency enabled them to work for the U.S. government overseas, they may not always have the writing skills needed for professional work in the United States. Officials from a career development organization that works directly with highly skilled immigrants, including SIV holders, to help them re-enter their fields in the United States said that SIV holders may sometimes be hindered in re-entering their original professional fields because during the time they worked as interpreters, translators, or other positions for the U.S. government, they may not have been actively employed in their original fields.⁴⁶
- *Barriers to foreign degree and credential recognition:* While SIV holders and others may be able to get their foreign degrees or other credentials assessed for U.S. equivalency, these processes can be costly or time consuming, according to officials we interviewed from one national and two local resettlement agencies. Staff from two national resettlement agencies said that degree recognition could be particularly challenging for Afghan SIV holders because the nature of conflict in Afghanistan made it harder for evaluators to connect with universities there. Other research we reviewed identified the complexities of the licensing process and of available career paths as challenges for highly skilled and educated immigrants in the United States in general.⁴⁷

Officials we interviewed from about half of the local resettlement agencies said that because principal SIV holders were often unable to find employment in their prior profession, many took "survival" or low-skilled jobs in order to cover basic expenses. Officials from local resettlement agencies, as well as participants in our focus groups, reported that common jobs for principal SIV holders included drivers for ride-sharing services like Uber and Lyft, airport workers such as luggage handling and

⁴⁶In one of our focus groups with principal SIV holders, one participant also expressed concern that he was losing his skills related to his field of expertise by not working in that field for certain periods of time.

⁴⁷See L. Rabben, Migration Policy Institute, *Credential Recognition in the United States for Foreign Professionals*, (Washington, D.C. May 2013).

food service, security guards, low-level information technology workers such as cell phone assembly or temporary technician, or warehouse workers such as inventory or stocking. One principal SIV holder we spoke to in our focus groups said he worked as a civil engineer for 6 years in Afghanistan, but was assembling cell phones in the United States, which was disappointing for him given his years of experience and education. In almost all of our focus groups with principal SIV holders, participants expressed frustration about the barriers to re-entering their professional fields and the need to take low-skilled jobs.

These employment-related challenges did not align with the expectations of principal SIV holders, who thought that their education and prior work experience with the U.S. government would enable them to find skilled work, according to many national and local resettlement agency officials we interviewed and SIV holders who participated in our focus groups. All 3 state refugee coordinators, representatives of 7 of 9 national resettlement agencies, and representatives of 10 of 13 local resettlement agencies we spoke to said that SIV holders tend to have high, unrealistic expectations about employment or about life in general after they arrive. As one principal SIV holder from one of our focus groups in California stated: "I thought I would not need to worry about anything in the U.S. for years and they will take care of me and my family because I worked for their government." SIV holders in our focus groups also expected more assistance in obtaining high-skilled employment than they generally received. In all 8 of our focus groups conducted with principal SIV holders, some participants expected more assistance getting back into their fields of interest, but said that local resettlement agencies did not always have the technical skills or resources needed to assist them. Similarly, in 4 of the 8 focus groups with principal SIV holders, some participants reported that they expected to receive sufficient government assistance to cover expenses while they adapted to life in the United States, spent time getting retrained or recertified, or searched for employment.

Because of these high expectations, the reality of starting over was frustrating or shocking, and made the initial resettlement process challenging, according to both staff from local resettlement agencies and SIV holders from our focus groups. Officials from a number of national and local resettlement agencies said that SIV holders' expectations tended to be higher than other clients they served, such as refugees. Officials we interviewed from a number of national and local resettlement agencies agreed that they would have liked to do more for SIV holders, given their sacrifice in working for the U.S. government, but that they treat

all of their clients in the resettlement program the same, in accordance with PRM's cooperative agreements. Staff from one national resettlement agency and one local resettlement agency agreed that while they would like to assist SIV holders and other highly-skilled clients to obtain better or more skilled jobs, they did not have the resources or capacity to provide a significant amount of specialized help over a longer term.

False expectations about resettlement may have come through word of mouth or other sources, according to resettlement agency staff and SIV holders we interviewed. Some local resettlement agency staff said SIV holders' high expectations may be due in part to inaccurate information from the SIV holder community through social media or word of mouth. Staff from one local resettlement agency reported that managing SIV holders' high expectations was time-consuming for staff because there was a "mountain of misinformation" within the community. Principal SIV holders may have also received false hope from their overseas U.S. military colleagues, who may not understand the challenges of resettlement. For example, one principal SIV holder we spoke to in our focus groups said that his American co-workers in Afghanistan told him it would be easy to find a good job in the United States because of his skills, but he said finding employment in his previous field was challenging and he is now working for a warehouse packing department.

Virginia's Skills Training for Enhanced Earning Potential (STEP)



The Virginia Refugee Resettlement Program Manual states that the STEP program provides highly-skilled participants with specialized services that include professional assessments and assistance in accessing training, certifications, and courses related to prior careers. STEP participants are selected based on an employment assessment of all participants enrolled in Virginia's refugee social service employment program, which is available to those who have had a refugee eligible status for less than 5 years and are over age 16. Many STEP beneficiaries in Northern Virginia are special immigrant visa (SIV) holders, according to the Virginia State Refugee Coordinator. The STEP program is funded through the Office of Refugee Resettlement's Refugee Social Services and Targeted Assistance funds, and services are provided by local resettlement agencies.

Source: Virginia Department of Social Services, Office of Newcomer Services. | GAO-18-107

California Law on In-state Tuition for SIV Holders and Refugees

In October 2017, California enacted Assembly Bill 343, which provides certain special immigrant visa (SIV) holders and refugees admitted to the United States and who settle in California with in-state tuition at California Community Colleges for the minimum time necessary to become a resident. (Students generally need to live in California for more than one year and meet other requirements to qualify for in-state tuition.) The legislature's finding, as stated in the bill, was that access to institutions of higher education will ensure that SIV holders are "able to pursue their educational goals and rebuild and improve their lives and the lives of their families."

Source: California Assembly Bill 343, codified at California Education Code § 68075.6. | GAO-18-107

Note: GAO did not conduct an exhaustive search of state laws in carrying out this work.

Officials we interviewed from some national and local resettlement agencies and other organizations said they were trying to address employment-related challenges to SIV holders' resettlement through various strategies and practices. (See sidebars.) They include:

- *Used ORR or other federal funds to support career development programs:* Officials we interviewed at local resettlement agencies in Texas and Virginia said they used ORR funding to support career development programs for SIV holders and other clients. For example, officials from Catholic Charities Dallas said they used ORR's Refugee Social Services funds to offer clients training and certifications in technical occupations, such as clinical nurse or forklift operator. Officials we interviewed from other organizations said they also relied on programming or funds provided under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) for career development programs that could serve SIV holders. For example, officials from the International Rescue Committee's national office said that some of their local offices used WIOA's American Job Center system to help SIV holders and other skilled clients with good English skills access training opportunities or other job search resources. Officials from the Sacramento Employment Training Agency told us they recently utilized WIOA and other funding to launch an English Language Learner Workforce Navigator pilot that will emphasize assisting SIV holders and refugees because of large populations of these groups in Sacramento County. The program aims to provide participants with additional entry points to employment and training opportunities, as well as case management and supportive services.
- *Partnered with private organizations for employment and career programming:* Some officials we interviewed from national and local resettlement agencies had established partnerships with private organizations to fund programs or scholarships to assist SIV holders with career advancement. For example, officials from the International Rescue Committee told us they had partnered with LinkedIn to establish a specific training and job search program for SIV holders now offered in five of their locations, including in Sacramento. Separately, the International Rescue Committee's Northern California office offered scholarships of up to \$5,000 through a local private foundation that provided SIV holders, along with refugee and asylee clients, short-term career training or recertification, such as armed guard certification, truck driving courses, or electrical training. In addition, officials we spoke to from an advocacy and service organization, No One Left Behind, reported that they had established

Career Services for Professionals



Upwardly Global officials describe their work as eliminating employment barriers for special immigrant visa (SIV) holders, immigrants and refugees who were professionals in their home countries. They work to help these newcomers re-enter their career fields after moving to the United States, according to staff we interviewed and other information. The organization offers career development programming including training on the U.S. job search, specialized training opportunities, and recertification services. It provides these services to job seekers in-person at physical locations (Chicago, New York, San Francisco, and Silver Spring, Maryland), as well as virtually through online services, training modules, or other job resources. Since 2009, the organization has placed 69 individuals with SIVs (of 236 served) into new employment with an average annual salary of about \$54,000 at placement, according to data from Upwardly Global. SIV holders most commonly placed in jobs in technology, engineering, or finance and accounting, according to staff we interviewed.

Source: Upwardly Global. | GAO-18-107

a grant with Starbucks for an employment placement program to help SIV holders obtain employment at Starbucks and at other companies.

- *Utilized volunteer job coaches or outside organizations to provide career development:* Officials from Catholic Charities Fort Worth, for example, said they recruited retirees who were former professionals to voluntarily work one-on-one with clients on job readiness skills, such as interviews, resume writing, and general career planning. Officials we interviewed from several national and local resettlement agencies or county service providers also reported that they sometimes refer clients to outside organizations with career development programming for highly-skilled immigrants, such as Upwardly Global (see sidebar).

Housing Issues and Integration of Female Spouses Were Other Challenges

Housing

While housing challenges were common among both SIV holders and refugees, SIV holders tended to have high expectations, according to staff from some local resettlement agencies. Officials from national and local resettlement agencies, as well as SIV holders from our focus groups, described several housing related challenges:

- *Local resettlement agencies faced barriers to securing housing:* SIV holders, like refugees, lack rental or credit histories and Social Security numbers when they arrive in the United States, which limits the housing options available to local resettlement agencies who must

secure their housing. Local resettlement agency staff said that they had built relationships with landlords who were willing to forego these requirements; accordingly, some staff reported that SIV holders and refugees were often housed in certain apartment complexes.

- *SIV holders in our focus groups expected better housing:* In 10 of 11 focus groups we conducted, SIV holders reported that sometimes the apartments they lived in were not of high quality, they experienced problems with infestation, or had concerns about safety.⁴⁸ The SIV holders in our focus groups who had problems with infestation or other issues said that they reported them to the landlord or local resettlement agency and the issues were generally addressed, but not always to their satisfaction. Additionally, according to staff from national and local resettlement agencies, as well as SIV holders in 5 of our 11 focus groups, SIV holders often expected better housing or to be placed in certain locations near the main SIV holder community; however, this was not always possible due to limited availability of affordable housing. SIV holders in some of our focus groups also reported that they could not afford to move to nicer apartments.
- *Affordable housing was limited:* Housing affordability was also cited as a major challenge, especially by local resettlement agency staff and SIV holder participants in 5 of our focus groups in Northern Virginia and Oakland, California. In Alameda County, where the city of Oakland is located, and in the city of Alexandria, where most SIV holders from our 3 focus groups in Northern Virginia lived, the median rental cost for a one-bedroom apartment in 2016 was about \$1,400, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. In Sacramento and Dallas, rising housing costs were cited as growing challenges by staff from some local resettlement agencies and SIV holders in 3 of our 4 focus groups in those cities.⁴⁹ While there are no national guidelines for affordability, officials from one national resettlement agency said that their general rule is to find housing that a family could afford on their expected income and have extra for other expenses.

⁴⁸PRM outlines housing standards in its cooperative agreement, in which housing provided by local resettlement agencies must be safe, sanitary, and affordable. These standards are monitored by PRM and national resettlement agencies. We did not review the extent to which housing provided to SIV holders met these standards, as the data are not tracked in this way.

⁴⁹According to U.S. Census Bureau data, median rental cost for a one-bedroom apartment in 2016 in Sacramento County and in Dallas County were both about \$860.

Some groups we spoke with used strategies to help address housing challenges. For example, Catholic Charities Dallas had a dedicated housing specialist whose primary job was to find and place clients into suitable housing and whose work included conducting outreach to new apartment complexes to ensure that they knew of the agency and the benefits of renting to SIV holders and refugee clients. Officials from Catholic Charities of the East Bay in Oakland described their church sponsorship program in which a local church is matched with a family to help subsidize rent and support the family in other areas, often for 6 months or more. Also, officials from one advocacy and service organization, No One Left Behind, said they assisted local resettlement agencies with finding housing for SIV holders, and had established agreements with local resettlement agencies in some cities, including Rochester, New York and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to secure housing and provide furnishings for all SIV holder families they resettled.

Integration of Female Spouses

Officials we interviewed from all 9 national resettlement agencies and 12 of 13 local resettlement agencies reported that female SIV spouses experienced specific barriers to assimilation. These include:

- *Female SIV spouses experienced cultural adjustment challenges:* Officials from national and local resettlement agencies reported that the gap between male principal SIV holders and their spouses in terms of English proficiency, education, work experience, or exposure to American culture, could be large and created challenges for women's integration, especially for Afghan women, a few officials noted. Accordingly, male principal SIV holders may be able to more quickly integrate, while female SIV spouses may be less likely to participate in programs, struggle to integrate, or feel isolated, according to officials from national and local resettlement agencies. Officials noted that this gap tended to be larger than between refugee husbands and wives, who may be more evenly matched. Our analysis of PRM data confirmed that differences in education and spoken English levels were larger between principal SIV holders and spouses

than with refugee principals and spouses.⁵⁰ According to our analysis of PRM data on SIV spouses, 42 percent reported speaking no English, with those from Afghanistan much less likely to speak any English than those from Iraq. Afghan SIV spouses were also about one-third as likely to have reported completing postsecondary education as Iraqi SIV spouses, based on available data.⁵¹ In contrast, in our focus groups some female SIV spouses and some female principal SIV holders had prior work experience and high levels of education. For example, about one-third of the female SIV spouses in our focus groups (9 of 27) reported on their participant surveys that they had prior work experience in their home countries, including as teachers and journalists.

- *Lack of childcare and limited transportation options:* Officials we interviewed from local resettlement agencies and SIV spouses in two of our focus groups said that barriers around childcare and transportation made it challenging for female SIV spouses to leave the house for classes or employment. For example, in one of our Sacramento focus groups, several female SIV spouses reported that they wanted to take English classes and find work, but the cost of childcare and lack of public transportation, including school buses for their children, were prohibitive.

National and local resettlement agency officials also reported that female SIV spouses may take longer to assimilate and feel isolated because of families' expectations about female spouses staying home. Officials from one national resettlement agency said that prior to arrival, many SIV holders and their families lived comfortably on one income, and therefore female spouses were often not initially willing to work, which strained finances and made self-sufficiency difficult. In all three of our focus groups with female SIV spouses, participants said that they would like to work, but needed to wait until their children were older or needed to learn English first.

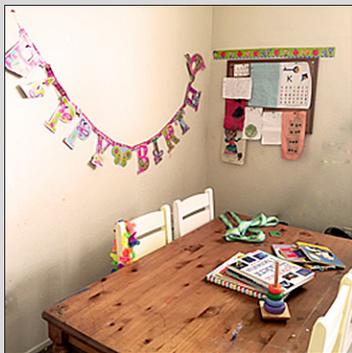
⁵⁰According to our analysis of PRM data, 86 percent of principal SIV holders and 19 percent of SIV spouses reported good spoken English (a difference of 67 percentage points), whereas among all resettled refugees, 8 percent of principals and 4 percent of spouses reported good English (a difference of 4 percentage points). Similarly, 87 percent of principal SIV holders and 59 percent of SIV spouses reported having secondary education or higher (a difference of 28 percentage points), whereas among all resettled refugees, 49 percent of principals and 45 percent of spouses reported having secondary education or higher (a difference of 4 percentage points).

⁵¹About one-third of SIV spouses were missing education level information in the PRM data, as the provision of this information is optional, according to PRM officials.

Officials we interviewed from several resettlement agencies described their efforts to address some of the challenges related to the integration of female spouses. They include:

- *Engaged SIV women independent from their spouses:* Staff from two local resettlement agencies reported providing intake for men and women separately so that they ensure that women had a connection to resettlement agency staff independent of their husbands. Other agencies reported that they started making sure that an interpreter was provided for the female spouse rather than having her husband act as an interpreter, so that they could ensure everyone received the same information and that such information was not filtered through the husband. Staff we spoke to at one local resettlement agency acknowledged that their employment services had previously been primarily focused on the male clients in each household, but that they had since created a separate curriculum for women to ensure that all adult clients received job readiness training.
- *Mitigated barriers faced by female SIV spouses to attend English classes and to work:* To address childcare and transportation barriers, staff we spoke to at three local resettlement agencies said they offered English language classes at apartment complexes with many SIV holder families, with childcare provided. Several local resettlement agencies also used volunteers to provide in-home English classes and mentoring for SIV women. Officials from two local resettlement agencies said they provided women’s empowerment programming to overcome isolation and other issues. For example, officials from International Rescue Committee Dallas told us that they offered a women’s empowerment class that met two times per week to discuss varying topics, including public transit, job readiness, and sewing.

Home-Based Childcare as Employment for SIV Women



Officials from Opening Doors Sacramento, an affiliate of Church World Service, told us that they assist women who are special immigrant visa (SIV) holders and refugees convert their homes into home-based childcare centers. Opening Doors utilizes funds from the Office of Refugee Resettlement’s grant on micro-finance and partners with a local social service agency to help the women start a business plan and get licensed. As of April 2017, over 50 women have received their license through this program, many of whom are from Afghanistan, according to officials from Opening Doors.

Source: Opening Doors Sacramento. | GAO-18-107

State and HHS Have Taken Steps to Address SIV Holders' Issues, Although Lack of Communication May Hamper Efforts

State's PRM has taken several steps to address the capacity challenges reported by resettlement agencies in Northern Virginia. First, in May 2017, PRM placed limitations on SIV holders' resettlement in that area in response to concerns raised by local resettlement agencies and the state refugee coordinator, and in consultation with national resettlement agencies, advocacy groups, and ORR.⁵² The policy generally restricts SIV holders from being placed in Northern Virginia unless they have close family ties there. Second, in June 2017, PRM issued another new policy that gives SIV holders more resettlement options. Under this new policy, SIV holders can choose to be placed in one of 25 cities without having a U.S. tie (see table 2). This option did not exist previously, as SIV holders, like refugees, were typically placed near a specified U.S. tie or in a location primarily determined by resettlement agencies. According to PRM officials, by providing a choice to SIV holders, they aimed to increase the likelihood of successful resettlement in these alternative areas and mitigate secondary migration (when people leave their initial placement to move to desired locations). PRM officials said that they considered various factors in developing the list of 25 cities, including the presence of existing SIV communities, sufficient capacity to resettle new arrivals among local resettlement agencies, and housing availability and employment opportunities based on information from local resettlement agencies. In finalizing its list of cities, PRM also sought input from national resettlement agencies, advocacy organizations, and ORR.

⁵²According to officials, PRM institutes such restrictions infrequently, and only when the state and local community request it due to significant capacity challenges. PRM instituted similar placement restrictions two other times when resettlement agencies were over capacity in managing refugee arrivals: for Iraqi refugees in Detroit, Michigan from 2008 through 2010 and for Burmese refugees in Fort Wayne, Indiana from 2009 through 2012.

Table 2: List of Placement Options for Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Holders, Posted by Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) in June 2017

City	State
1. Phoenix	Arizona
2. Denver	Colorado
3. Jacksonville	Florida
4. Atlanta	Georgia
5. Chicago	Illinois
6. Louisville	Kentucky
7. Detroit metro area ^a	Michigan
8. St. Louis	Missouri
9. Omaha	Nebraska
10. Durham	North Carolina
11. Raleigh	North Carolina
12. Elizabeth	New Jersey
13. Las Vegas	Nevada
14. Albany	New York
15. Buffalo	New York
16. Rochester	New York
17. Cleveland	Ohio
18. Portland	Oregon
19. Philadelphia	Pennsylvania
20. Pittsburgh	Pennsylvania
21. Austin	Texas
22. Dallas	Texas
23. Fort Worth	Texas
24. Houston	Texas
25. Salt Lake City	Utah

Source: Information from PRM and available at <http://www.wrapsnet.org/siv-iraqi-syrian-p-2/>. | GAO-18-107

Note: SIV holders have three options to influence where they will be placed in the United States. They may select a city from the list above, report a tie living elsewhere in the United States with whom they would like to reunify, or allow the resettlement agency to select a location, based on normal placement practices.

^aIncludes the cities of Ann Arbor, Dearborn, and Troy.

Cultural Orientation Video
Series for SIVs (STEP)



SIV Stories: Starting Anew in the United States is a series of four videos, about 10 to 15 minutes each, produced in 2016, by the Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange (CORE). CORE is managed by the International Rescue Committee and funded by Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. These videos focus on the experiences of special immigrant visa (SIV) holders who have resettled to the United States in several locations, including Virginia and Texas. Videos feature SIV holders discussing certain challenges, such as in finding skilled employment and needing to start over in the United States.

<https://coresourceexchange.org/resource/siv-video-series>

Source: Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange. | GAO-18-107

To inform SIV holders about resettlement prior to arrival and to better manage their expectations, PRM has developed informational materials specifically for SIV holders. All individuals served through the R&P program must receive cultural orientation training once they arrive in the United States, according to R&P guidelines, and many refugees also take this training overseas.⁵³ In contrast, SIV holders generally do not take overseas cultural orientation training because they typically receive their visas in locations where there are no facilities to provide such training. PRM officials said providing special cultural orientation training sessions for SIV holders, such as at the U.S. embassy in Kabul, would be logistically difficult and potentially result in additional security risks for SIV holders. In lieu of overseas cultural orientation trainings, PRM provides a Dari-translated version of its manual on U.S. resettlement, *Welcome to the United States: A Guidebook for Refugees*, for distribution by the U.S. embassy in Kabul. It has also developed several other types of informational materials specifically for SIV holders, including documents such as “19 Things You Need to Know About Resettling in the United States” and “Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Resettlement Benefits for Iraqi and Afghan Recipients of Special Immigrant Visas,” as well as short videos aimed specifically at SIV holders (see sidebar). SIV holders can access informational materials on State’s Refugee Processing Center’s website, and links to this website are included at the end of emails from PRM staff when communicating with SIV holders, according to PRM officials. Additionally, PRM officials noted that they have also worked with advocacy groups who may be communicating with SIV holders while overseas, to disseminate information, such as the challenges of resettling in high cost-of-living areas. Officials said that their efforts to inform SIV holders about resettlement before they come to the United States have been ongoing for several years.

However, officials we interviewed from many national and local resettlement agencies, as well as those from some state refugee coordinator offices and advocacy groups, said that State could do more to inform SIV holders about resettlement while they were still overseas, given their often false expectations about resettlement. For instance, officials from a number of these entities said that PRM’s informational

⁵³According to our analysis of PRM data from 2011 through the first half of 2017, about three-fourths of all resettled refugees received some form of cultural orientation overseas, while virtually no SIV holders received this. Although the cultural orientation provided to refugees generally covers standard topics, training sessions can vary greatly in terms of length and depth, according to PRM officials.

materials for SIV holders are general and lack specific details or more in-depth information on issues, such as housing affordability, employment, or the type of government assistance they will or are likely to receive. This type of information could provide them a better sense of what to expect when they resettle in the United States, according to officials.

Based on our review, we found that while the materials discuss resettlement challenges generally, such as difficulties associated with relocating in certain high-cost areas or the likelihood that SIV holders will need to take an entry-level job instead of one in their professional field, they do not contain specific details, examples, or links to specific information. For example, the materials do not provide information on area housing costs in popular resettlement areas or common jobs or average wages among SIV holders (or refugees). They provide minimal information on the amounts people may receive in government assistance or the extent to which they can expect assistance with such things as longer-term training or education. PRM's new list of 25 cities, for instance, includes a link to each city's municipal government website, but such websites are unlikely to provide easy access to information, such as area housing costs, that could help inform people's resettlement choices. PRM officials stated that they are wary of providing specific details because these may vary for SIV families, depending on the state where they reside, the assistance programs in which they participate, their particular household situation, or other factors. Such differences can be a source of misinformation among those in the SIV community, according to PRM officials, as well as some resettlement agencies we interviewed. Accordingly, officials noted that they would not want to be in a position to defend information that may be inaccurate or not applicable to SIV holders. Officials we interviewed from two resettlement agencies also noted that it could be challenging to provide specific details, such as on government benefit amounts, as these may vary greatly across households.

Yet, officials we interviewed from other resettlement agencies and advocacy groups noted that illustrative details, examples, or more in-depth discussion on key issues would provide SIV holders more understanding of what they may experience and inform their decision-making. Providing web links to relevant information or additional information from official sources may also help SIV holders gather information from more credible sources and counter some of the misinformation they may receive through word of mouth, according to a state refugee coordinator and officials at two local resettlement agencies we interviewed. Similarly, participants in 5 of our 11 focus groups said

that getting additional cultural orientation or more information about life in the United States, such as from State, would have been useful. Some said they did not always get an accurate picture of resettlement from their U.S. ties. One principal SIV holder we spoke to said getting additional information about resettlement while still overseas would have been useful for SIV holders since it can be difficult to learn all this information once they have arrived in the United States, as they are in “culture shock” and “overwhelmed” by all they have to do. In contrast, participants in three focus groups said that access to more resettlement information overseas would not have been useful: People’s primary focus at that time is on simply getting their visa and leaving the country.

In addition to the lack of specificity in the information provided to prospective SIV holders, some of State’s efforts to disseminate existing information are also incomplete. For instance, we learned of some instances of miscommunication between PRM and Consular Affairs regarding information provided to SIV holders at embassies. While PRM officials told us they understood that the embassies in Kabul and Baghdad provided SIV holders with hard copies of Welcome to the United States, and played the informational videos for SIV holders on a loop, officials from Consular Affairs told us that the Bagdad embassy no longer provided hard copies of guides due to costs, and neither embassy played the videos due to space and other issues.⁵⁴ Officials we interviewed from a few resettlement agencies and advocacy groups suggested that there may be additional opportunities for State to disseminate information, such as making the “19 Things to Know” document available at more touch points. The links to such SIV-specific informational documents are directly available on State’s Refugee Processing Center website and through the form SIV holders complete to elect to receive resettlement benefits. However, they are not directly accessible on State’s Consular Affairs’ websites that describe the steps to apply for a SIV. Further, these SIV-specific documents are also not offered at embassies or mailed to SIV holders in their visa packages, according to Consular Affairs officials. Moreover, in several of our focus groups, some participants stated that they did not remember receiving any or much information on resettlement in the United States while in their home country, including information aimed specifically at SIV holders.

⁵⁴Subsequently, officials from PRM told us that hard copies of the welcome guides were no longer being provided to SIV holders at the U.S. embassy in Baghdad because of safety concerns over carrying and having the guide in their possession. Instead, these guides are offered during SIV holders’ transit through Amman, Jordan.

Federal internal controls state that management should externally communicate necessary quality information to achieve objectives, considering audience, nature of information, availability of information, and costs in doing so.⁵⁵ Because State's current information to SIV holders overseas is general and the agency may miss opportunities to disseminate or otherwise make individuals aware of the information, SIV holders may be hampered in their ability to make well-informed decisions on where to resettle in the United States, as well as in their ability to prepare and adapt to potential challenges as quickly as possible upon arrival.

ORR's New Grant Provides More Targeted Assistance on Working with Skilled Immigrants

Although ORR does not provide specific support or assistance for SIV holders, ORR's funding and technical assistance for refugees and other eligible clients can be used to support programming for highly skilled clients, including SIV holders. For example, states can use Refugee Social Services and Targeted Assistance Grant funds to develop specialized programs aimed at higher skilled immigrants, if they choose. Among our selected states, Virginia used these funds to support its career development program.⁵⁶ ORR also uses a technical assistance provider, Higher, to provide support related to employment and self-sufficiency.⁵⁷ Higher makes various employment resources available that resettlement agencies or other service providers can use, including those that can help serve highly skilled clients, such as webinars or postings on educational or career development opportunities.⁵⁸ Higher has also developed online training modules, recertification guides, and other resources that refugees, SIV holders, or other clients can directly access through its website, in addition to posting links to other providers' services, such as those from Upwardly Global, which are directly accessible by clients.

⁵⁵[GAO-14-704G](#).

⁵⁶Other states which have used ORR Refugee Support Services or Targeted Assistance funds to develop such programs include Washington and Maryland, according to ORR officials; however, officials did not have a complete list of such states.

⁵⁷Higher is operated by Lutheran Immigration Refugee Services, one of the nine national resettlement agencies.

⁵⁸For instance, in July 2017 Higher had a webinar on how to design a job upgrade program, as well as an article on how to serve highly skilled clients without "re-inventing the wheel." (<http://www.higheradvantage.org>)

In addition, in June 2017, ORR posted a new \$3 million competitive grant announcement for the Refugee Career Pathways program that aims to address the challenges experienced by highly skilled refugees, SIV holders, or other eligible populations in moving beyond low-skilled work into professional fields with career advancement opportunities (see text box). The grant announcement states that this program will utilize a “career pathways” approach, as defined by WIOA, which is a combination of training, education, and services to help people obtain short-term and long-term career opportunities in specific fields that align with state or regional economic needs. Possible types of assistance that could be provided to participants include case management, training and technical assistance, mentoring, or financial assistance for educational or certification programs. This ORR grant aligns with the desire for more targeted assistance and information for skilled immigrants, such as SIV holders, which was expressed by officials we interviewed at a number of national and local resettlement agencies and SIV holders in our focus groups.

Goals of Office of Refugee Resettlement’s new Refugee Career Pathways Program

“The Refugee Career Pathways (RCP) program is a new program established by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to address the obstacles faced by resettled refugees in initiating professional careers in their new communities. While many refugees have previous professional experience in their country of origin, they often lack the degrees, certifications, and knowledge specific to the U.S. job environment needed to attain professional employment after resettlement. Even highly-skilled refugees are often required to take low-skilled jobs with little opportunity for advancement or skill development. This in turn limits refugees’ potential to achieve economic self-sufficiency and to benefit their communities by making full use of the skills and experience they bring to their new home. The goal of the RCP program is to support refugees in attaining the knowledge and resources needed to begin a professional career in their new community. Existing job training programs for refugees often focus on supporting initial job placement, which may not be adequate to secure long-term self-sufficiency. The RCP program will assist refugees to begin professional careers that provide not only a salary but also greater job security and the possibility of career advancement.”

Source: Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement. | GAO-18-107

Conclusions

SIV holders resettle in the United States in most cases to escape endangerment—a result of their work for the U.S. government in Iraq or Afghanistan. After their resettlement, however, no outcome information exists beyond whether SIV holders are minimally self-sufficient within their first 6 months. SIV holders are a small group compared to the larger, general population of refugees. Yet ORR faced and overcame similar constraints in conducting studies on other special populations in the past, such as the Lost Boys of Sudan, responding to the focus and concern of policymakers about those populations at the time. Although ORR could leverage its existing methodologies to examine SIV holders’ longer-term outcomes in further research, similar to what it did for other groups, it has not yet fully explored the feasibility of doing so or other possibilities to

obtain information about the SIV holder population. ORR's new survey redesign efforts, aimed at improving its understanding of the long-term outcomes of refugees and related populations, provide the agency an opportunity to do this. Until then, policymakers have no information as to whether SIV holders—a population of special interest and one with an increasing presence in the federal refugee resettlement programs—are successfully resettling in the United States.

While many of the resettlement challenges related to employment, housing, or cultural integration are outside of State's control, they may be exacerbated by SIV holders' own high expectations about resettlement. These expectations are often cultivated before they arrive from overseas. State's efforts to inform SIV holders about resettlement have been ongoing for years and, to some extent, help overcome the logistical difficulties of not being able to provide SIV holders with cultural orientation training before they come. However, the persistent gap among SIV holders' expectations and their experiences, as described by many of the SIV holders and officials we interviewed from national and local resettlement agencies and advocacy groups, and other stakeholders, suggests that these efforts are falling short. While State has made efforts to disseminate the information through various touchpoints, there are missed opportunities for distribution, such as at embassies. When coupled with the lack of examples or details in State's informational materials for SIV holders, these missed opportunities may contribute to SIV holders' ongoing false expectations of resettlement.

Finding additional ways to deliver information to SIV holders about the realities of resettlement could help them make more informed decisions about where they choose to resettle—decisions which may be predicated on their ability to access additional information about important factors such as employment opportunities or area housing costs. Such information, while not a panacea for the real resettlement challenges SIV holders face, can at least help them make decisions that better align their personal situation with the economic realities of resettlement in the United States. Additional information could also mitigate SIV holders' surprise and frustration once they arrive, better enable them to quickly orient to their new lives, as well as help refugee agencies facilitate that transition.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making two recommendations, including one to ORR and one to PRM:

1. The Director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) should consider including SIV holders in its Annual Survey of Refugees. (Recommendation 1)
2. The Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) should identify and implement additional ways to deliver information to prospective SIV holders about resettlement to assist with adjustment and expectations after arrival in the United States, including providing more detailed or in-depth information on key issues. PRM, working with Consular Affairs as needed, should also identify and address potential gaps in disseminating relevant information to SIV holders, such as at embassies. (Recommendation 2)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of our report to HHS and State for review and comment. Both agencies agreed with our recommendations. In its response, HHS stated that while it did not believe including SIV holders in the Annual Survey of Refugee was feasible under the current contract due to costs, it would continue to look for cost-effective ways to include SIV holders in its survey redesign efforts and in future contracts. HHS stated that it would also explore ways to capture more information on SIV holders through its administrative program data, including on employment outcomes. State, in its response, said that PRM has developed new guidance for the Refugee Processing Center's SIV unit regarding the distribution of additional information to SIV holders and that staff from this unit plan to include additional links to cultural orientation information in all their correspondences with SIV applicants. Additionally, State noted that Embassy Baghdad will distribute copies of the Welcome Guide to Iraqi SIV holders and that PRM will work with Consular Affairs to identify other ways to provide information to SIV applicants. HHS and State also provided technical comments, which we incorporated into the report as appropriate.

As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies to the appropriate congressional committees, Secretaries of Health and Human Services and State, and other interested parties. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7215 or larink@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Key contributors to this report are listed in appendix IV.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kathryn A. Larin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Kathryn A. Larin
Director
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

List of Requesters

The Honorable Jerrold Nadler
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
House of Representatives

The Honorable Zoe Lofgren
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security
Committee on the Judiciary
House of Representatives

The Honorable Earl Blumenauer
House of Representatives

The Honorable Doris Matsui
House of Representatives

The Honorable Seth Moulton
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Additional Methodological Details

This appendix provides additional information on our methodologies for our analysis of data from the Department of State (State) and on our focus groups with special immigrant visa (SIV) holders.

Analysis of State Data

We analyzed individual record-level data from State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) for fiscal years 2011 through the first quarter of 2017 (i.e., October 2010 through December 2016) that provide information on recipients of State's resettlement program, the Reception and Placement (R&P) program. Fiscal year 2011 was the first year of the R&P program's current reporting requirements, and December 2016 was the most current data available at the time of our review. Overall, this timeframe accounted for about 40,000 individual SIV holders (principal SIV holders and their family members) and 14,000 cases, or households, before we excluded instances of missing data. In our analysis and reported results, we excluded instances of missing data, such as when SIV holders migrated from their initial placements before resettlement agencies could collect 90-day outcome information, or, in the case of employment rates, when principal SIV holders were considered exempt from seeking employment for various reasons. This resulted in about 38,000 individuals and 13,000 cases.

The R&P information we examined included data on recipients' employment status and other household income sources at 90 days after arrival, such as from earnings or common cash assistance programs. Most of the R&P data are provided as "yes" or "no" responses, such as whether an individual is employed or whether the household has income that exceeds expenses. R&P data are collected by national and local resettlement agencies on all individuals served through the R&P program, and reported to PRM at one-point in time—90 days after individuals' arrival in the United States. Per R&P reporting requirements, some data are collected at the case or household level, such as whether the household has sufficient income to meet expenses, while other data, such as employment status, are collected on each individual in a case.

Additionally, we reviewed PRM data on recipients' background characteristics, such as education level and spoken English ability, collected by PRM during the application and screening process prior to an individual's resettlement in the United States. PRM tracks information on all individuals applying to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, including those with SIVs, using its data repository known as the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System. Some of the background information on SIV holders, including education level and

spoken English level, are self-reported and provided on SIV application forms. PRM collected both the background and the R&P data in a way that allowed SIV holders to be examined separately from resettled refugees. We also did analyses with the same variables for resettled refugees from the same general timeframe.¹ We reviewed the data from PRM for missing data and internal inconsistencies, and interviewed PRM officials knowledgeable about the data to resolve identified issues. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for our purposes of reporting employment rates, income sources, and receipt of services at 90 days, as well as broad categories of education and spoken English levels, for SIV holders and, in some cases, refugees.

Focus Groups with SIV Holders

In each of our selected states (California, Texas, and Virginia), we conducted three to four focus groups with principal SIV holders and SIV spouses to better understand resettlement factors or challenges from their perspectives. In total, we conducted 11 focus groups and spoke with 86 participants from both Afghanistan and Iraq. Specifically, we conducted eight focus groups with all or mostly principal SIV holders. (Participants in seven of these groups were all male principal SIV holders; participants in one group included four male principal SIV holders and two female spouses.) We also conducted three focus groups with primarily female spouses. (All participants in these three groups were females; however, in two groups, one participant was the principal SIV holder.)

To supplement the information we gathered through our focus group discussions, we also distributed short anonymous surveys to participants at the end of each session. Among other basic questions, we asked participants whether they were currently employed and, if so, the type of work they did. We also asked principal SIV holders what type of work they did for the U.S. government, and SIV spouses whether they worked in their home country and the type of work. Almost all participants submitted a survey (84 of 86). However, some participants (particularly SIV spouses) appeared to have difficulty understanding the questions, although we had translation assistance during our focus groups. In our report, we discussed survey findings on principal SIV holders' prior work for the U.S. government and the prevalence of prior work among SIV spouses. Overall, these responses had few blanks, and the responses themselves seemed to indicate general understanding of the questions.

¹PRM provided the most recent available data at the time of each data request, resulting in one additional month of data on refugees.

The information gathered from interviews and focus groups from our site visits is not generalizable and is meant to provide illustrative examples.

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Health and Human Services



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

Assistant Secretary for Legislation
Washington, DC 20201

JAN 23 2018

Kathryn A. Larin
Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Larin:

Attached are comments on the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) report entitled, "*Afghan and Iraqi Special Immigrants: More Information on Their Resettlement Outcomes Would Be Beneficial*" (GAO-18-107).

The Department appreciates the opportunity to review this report prior to publication.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barbara Pisaro Clark".

Barbara Pisaro Clark
Acting Assistant Secretary for Legislation

Attachment

GENERAL COMMENTS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES (HHS) ON THE GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE'S DRAFT REPORT ENTITLED - AFGHAN AND IRAQI SPECIAL IMMIGRANTS: MORE INFORMATION ON THEIR RESETTLEMENT OUTCOMES WOULD BE BENEFICIAL (GAO-18-107)

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) appreciates the opportunity from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to review and comment on this draft report.

Recommendation 1

The Director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement should consider including special immigrant visas (SIV) holders in its Annual Survey of Refugees.

HHS Response

HHS concurs with the GAO's recommendation.

HHS does not believe the cost of including SIVs in the Annual Survey of Refugee is feasible under the current contract. However, HHS will continue to look at the cost-benefit analysis of including SIVs in the sample as part of its redesign efforts and in future contracts. Additionally, HHS will explore ways to capture information, including employment outcomes, about SIVs in its administrative data.

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of State



United States Department of State

Comptroller

Washington, DC 20520

JAN 17 2017

Charles M. Johnson, Jr.
Managing Director
International Affairs and Trade
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

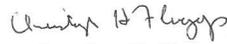
Dear Mr. Johnson:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "AFGHAN AND IRAQI SPECIAL IMMIGRANTS: More Information on Their Resettlement Outcomes Would Be Beneficial" GAO Job Code 101213.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Hilary Ingraham, Director, Office of Refugee Admissions, bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration at (703) 907-7283.

Sincerely,


Christopher H. Flaggs

Enclosure:
As stated

cc: GAO – Kathryn A. Larin
PRM – Simon Henshaw
OIG - Norman Brown

Department of State Comment on Draft GAO Report

**AFGHAN AND IRAQI SPECIAL IMMIGRANTS: More Information on
Their Resettlement Outcomes Would Be Beneficial**
(GAO-18-107 Code 101213)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the GAO draft report, entitled "*Afghan and Iraqi special Immigrants: More Information on Their Resettlement Outcomes Would Be Beneficial*".

The Department of State accepts the GAO's recommendation to identify and implement additional ways to deliver information to prospective SIV holders about resettlement to assist with adjustment and expectations after arrival in the United States, including providing more detailed or in-depth information on key issues. The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), working with Consular Affairs as needed, will also identify and address potential gaps in disseminating relevant information to SIV holders, such as at embassies. We agree with GAO's assessment that "such information, while not a panacea for the real resettlement challenges SIV holders face, can at least help them make decisions that better align their personal situation with the economic realities of resettlement in the United States".

PRM has developed new guidance for the Refugee Processing Center's (RPC) SIV unit regarding the distribution of additional information to SIVs. The RPC's SIV unit will add links to the Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange (CORE) website in all their correspondences with SIV applicants. The CORE website contains written information as well as videos translated into Dari, Arabic, and English that provide information about the U.S. resettlement process as well as life in the United States. Embassy Baghdad will also distribute copies of the Welcome Guide to Iraqi SIVs.

Additionally, PRM will meet with Consular Affairs to identify other ways CA may be able to incorporate information into its process.

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Kathryn A. Larin, 202-512-7215, larink@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact above, Janet Mascia (Assistant Director), Theresa Lo (Analyst-in-Charge), Cristina Norland, and Rachel Pittenger made key contributions to this report. Also contributing to this report were James Bennett, Kathryn Bernet, Pamela Davidson, Holly Dye, Sara Edmondson, Cynthia Grant, Marissa Jones, James Rebbe, and Rosemary Torres Lerma.

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