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Unsettling: The Flawed US Refugee System

Basel Awarek fled the Syrian war and made his way to suburban San Diego, where he is hopeful about life in America. He got a job offer, but had to turn it down. He has no money for a car.

Mohammad is now in Elizabeth, N.J., but fears if his full name is published, relatives in Syria would face retribution. He is worried about money, weakened by a gunshot wound and struggling to learn English as he seeks work.

Nayef Buteau's family resettled in suburban Detroit, but his eight-year-old son is still haunted by the conflict. “Every time [our son] hears any kind of sounds, he starts remembering the shelling,” Buteau said. “Even if someone knocks hard on the door, he starts to freak out.”

They are among the Syrian refugees who have arrived within the past few months, facing steep challenges and uncertain futures after escaping their war-torn homeland. While President Obama’s plan to accept more Syrians has sparked heated arguments, one key aspect remains largely unexamined in the public debate: the government’s $1.2 billion operation for helping refugees each year.

The federal government oversees a complex program to help refugees come to this country. But the effort does not always live up to all its promises, potentially making the path more difficult for refugees striving to adapt to their new homeland.

Audits, financial filings and internal government reports indicate that a significant number of government-funded charities contracted to help the newcomers are misspending money, an NYCity News Service examination of hundreds of documents found. Promised services are delayed or never delivered,
medical care is often postponed beyond guidelines and program oversight can lag, the documents show.

“The resources that governments put into this are pretty thin,” said Randy Capps, director of research for U.S. programs at the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington-based think tank that examines migration and refugee policies.

“Unlike other countries where refugees are resettled, there isn’t a huge safety net,” he added, citing concerns about underemployment, housing, English instruction and mental health care.

When refugees arrive in the U.S., they are thrust into a labyrinthine bureaucracy: The government funnels more than $500 million to scores of nonprofits charged with providing direct services to those trying to establish new lives.

But little-examined audits reveal that one out of five charities has financial red flags, including questionable spending and significant operational problems.

The nonprofits are supposed to help refugees settle into homes, find jobs, get medical exams, improve their English and adapt to the U.S.

Yet government records show these goals are not always met.

Federal guidelines call for refugees to get medical examinations within a month of landing here. The reality is far different: Almost two-thirds aren’t examined for months, if ever. Experts warn such delays pose grave concerns for Syrian refugees, stalling needed treatment for trauma tied to war and sexual assault prevalent in refugee camps.

There are missed opportunities: Refugees remain in camps overseas for months after they are designated to come to the U.S., yet they are not offered English classes. Instead, they’re supposed to wait until they arrive in America, where they’re expected to quickly find work.
Documents and studies raise questions about how resources and priorities are allocated as refugees struggle to rise from the ashes of war.

In spite of these challenges, many Syrians interviewed said they were determined to begin new lives in the U.S.

“We want to prove to the world who are Syrians,” said Buteau, who ran a car washing business on the outskirts of Daraa, a city in southwestern Syria. “We are going to show them that we are here not for assistance, but to have a life, to be working, to be productive.”

**STARTING A NEW LIFE ON $1,125**

The United States typically resettles about 70,000 refugees annually from around the world. They come from countries ravaged by war and natural disasters – places like Burma, Somalia and Iraq.

Just over 2,200 Syrian refugees have come to the U.S. since 2011. That is just a fraction of the more than 4.6 million displaced by a civil war more than four years old.

Many Syrian refugees remain in the Middle East, in camps in Lebanon and Jordan. An estimated 1.7 million are in Turkey. More than a million have migrated to Europe, where they have faced hostility along with welcomes.

For most Syrian refugees, the U.S. is not the first country of choice, experts say. Bassam Al-Kuwatli, a Canadian immigration consultant based in Turkey, said shorter distances and simpler government rules make it far easier to migrate to a European nation. In addition, Western European nations typically offer more generous services to refugees than does the U.S.
Germany alone has pledged to take in 500,000 Syrian asylum seekers. The U.S. has attempted to step up its resettlement efforts: President Obama announced a controversial plan last year to increase the number of Syrian refugees allowed in the U.S. to 10,000 a year through 2018.

The U.S. resettlement process, which can take two years, begins when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees certifies a person as a refugee – someone forced to flee their homeland in fear for their life. Refugees face numerous background checks and evaluations before they are allowed to travel to the U.S. with hopes of becoming citizens.

The State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration coordinates bringing refugees to the U.S. and helping them during their first 90 days. The bureau spends more than $500 million annually, channeling the money through nine large private charities. Those charities, in turn, funnel the money to about 175 smaller, local nonprofit organizations, which run approximately 300 offices around the country that are supposed to work directly with the new arrivals.

The State Department gives the private nonprofits a one-time payment of $2,025 per refugee. After the non-profit deducts administrative costs, $1,125 goes to each family member. The money, to be spent on housing, food and other expenses, is supposed to last three months.

The allowance “might sound like a lot, but when you factor in clothing, food, furniture, [the refugees] are sometimes left with much less for daily needs,” said Will Haney, associate director for external relations at Church World Service, one of the main resettlement agencies.

Haney estimated local churches add 30 to 40 percent in aid in major metropolitan areas, such as New York, where livings costs are high. “We’ve
always had to leverage private funds to help,” Haney said. “That’s been the reality.”

In suburban Detroit, Dr. Jihad Alharash, a volunteer with the Syrian American Rescue Network, said he has seen families use up their allowance within weeks of arriving.

“The agencies spend money on buying furniture and that comes out of the family’s allowance,” said Alharash. “That money is gone within three or four weeks.”

Refugees may get additional government help, such as Medicaid for health coverage and food stamps. But, he said, it is not enough: “Who’s going to pay their rent?”

Refugees can receive additional help through the federal Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement, which has an annual budget of a little more than $600 million. The agency, which helps with language classes, medical assistance, food aid and job training, can provide additional cash assistance for up to eight months, and other social services for as long as five years.

But a recent report by the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington, DC think tank, found federal funding that helps pay for these efforts has not kept up with inflation and program needs — funding has remained flat for the past 25 years.

The money that goes to refugees, in the best of circumstances, is tight.

“They are only partial benefits, so basically what happens is that it forces people to find a job,” said Larry Bartlett, the State Department’s director for refugee admissions. “That is deliberate, because we want people to get back on their feet
and want them to begin to become self-sufficient. We don’t have a very robust welfare system in the U.S. for U.S. citizens, and the services that refugees receive in that way are no different.”

**SPENDING RAISES QUESTIONS**

But even the limited government funding might not always find its way to refugees. Auditors uncovered financial problems at the State Department as well as the nonprofits that receive federal dollars for working with refugees.

The Government Accounting Office, for instance, found more than a year ago that the State Department did a poor job tracking spending – including grants given to nonprofits for resettling refugees – and reported that problems have not yet been fixed.

Government grants were deemed “at risk” – meaning the GAO found signs of financial mismanagement, poor performance and insufficient monitoring. Even when the State Department’s grant officials spotted troubled nonprofits, they did little to ensure money was spent properly, according to the GAO, which found the “State [Department] cannot be certain that its oversight is adequate.”

The State Department says it has improved its oversight of refugee grants, according to the GAO.

The State Department’s own inspector general found in 2013 that the agency did a poor job closing out its grants – including those tied to its refugee operations – leaving more than $21 million unused.

Still, in its most recent audit, independent auditors found the Department could have spent its funding better agency wide – including $209 million in “questioned costs.”

Meanwhile, a NYCity News Service analysis of hundreds of audits of nonprofits that get federal funding for refugee work found that one in five of those
examined have financial irregularities. That includes questionable spending, inadequate accounting and problems within key programs.

For example, Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota, which gets close to $2 million from the State Department for refugee resettlement, had questionable costs for the last three years, according to audits. A spokesman said the audits’ findings were related to paperwork discrepancies and had no impact on services to refugees.

Catholic Charities in San Antonio, Texas, which handles almost $6 million of refugee resettlement funds, suffered from “significant deficiencies” in how it monitors its programs, audits found. The charity declined a request for comment.

In all, 27 charities of 124 were found to have significant financial concerns, including questionable spending, weaknesses in oversight and significant deficiencies in major programs and other problems.

The most recent audits for another 20 charities showed that while they have no problems currently, they were deemed “high risk” because of past problems.

At Catholic Charities of Rockford, Ill., for example, auditors found the government-funded charity previously had problems with internal controls and questionable costs. The charity did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Not every nonprofit is audited. Any organization that gets a substantial government contract is required to hire auditors to examine its operations, and make those findings public. But if a charity spent less than $500,000, it was not
required to be audited. Some 45 charities, representing one in four of the charities that get refugee funding, was not examined this closely.

In addition, the charities are supposed to do more than spend taxpayer money: The federal government expects the nonprofits will add private dollars, labor and other resources toward resettlement efforts.

“It is a public-private partnership,” said Bartlett, the State Department’s director for refugee admissions. Non-profits, he said, “contribute volunteers as well as private fundraising to help provide the level of services that are needed.”

Yet a NYCity News Service analysis of tax returns found that 10 percent of the government-financed charities actually lost money in fundraising efforts in each of their last three years – including three that lost more than $100,000 during that period.

That includes the International Rescue Committee, one of the large voluntary agencies contracted to manage local nonprofits doing refugee work. Its tax filings show a loss of more than $1.3 million during the last three years of fundraising. A spokeswoman noted that the agency’s spending increased 30 percent in the last two years, but she did not specifically address the losses.

**HEALTH CARE SYSTEM FAILS ON EXAMS**

For all the money that does get spent on refugees, advocates say that newcomers aren’t getting all the services they’ve been promised – particularly medical care. Federal guidelines call for refugees to get medical examinations within 30 days of arriving in the U.S. While prospective refugees receive screenings overseas, post-arrival exams are supposed to be given to spot medical difficulties that may hinder resettlement. The examinations are also intended to familiarize newcomers with the nation’s medical system and connect them with physicians.
But a recent federal report shows only 37 percent of refugees get medical screenings within the 30-day guidelines. About a quarter get screened three months or more later. More than a third don’t get screened at all.

“The U.S. Department of State wants the refugees to receive the screenings and afterwards the treatment within 30 days,” said Jenny Aguirre, the Illinois state refugee health coordinator.

“We know this. But this is not what is happening in most places,” added Aguirre, who describes a system that is strained, with appointments hard to get.

Research shows that it’s crucial for trauma sufferers – including victims of war and sexual assault – to get treatment as soon as possible. The International Rescue Committee reported in 2013 that rape is a leading reason refugees fled Syria.

“These refugees have already waited a long time to arrive to the United States,” said Dr. Ray Shelton, director of the National Center for Crisis Management, a nonprofit group. “The symptoms of trauma have already gotten worse and worse in their waiting and traveling time to the U.S. And now they have to sit alone and traumatized in a new country without help [for] up to 90 days.

“Thirty days of waiting is a lot,” he said, “and 90 days is way too much.”

Some nonprofits are trying to help fill this gap. Iman Abdulrazzak, who works with the Michigan Muslim Community Council in suburban Detroit, points to the case of a young Syrian refugee who panicked during a school fire drill.
“For him, sirens and bells are a trigger for the trauma that he's experienced,” Abdulrazzak said. “So when the fire alarm went off, it was terrifying for him and some school officials didn't know what to do.”

Buteau’s son, Arab, suffers from panic attacks as well. He fled the war zone with his parents at age 7 to the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. They spent 20 days in the camp, which they describe as cold, with no electricity. Getting food or going to the bathroom required a walk of more than two miles.

As Arab battles psychological scars, his father awaits eye surgery before he can get his driver’s license. Yet the family, who did receive medical screenings within a month of arriving in the U.S., are among the lucky ones.

“We are so happy we arrived to America. We have our life now,” said Buteau, who, like all the refugees interviewed for this story, spoke through an interpreter.

“Our future is open again.”

**LOST IN TRANSLATION**

Many Syrian refugees arrive with scant knowledge of English. Medical examinations may be delayed because of a shortage of Arabic translators and doctors who speak Arabic.

But the repercussions from the language gap can extend to when refugees search for jobs and attempt to navigate an unfamiliar landscape. Critics fault the U.S. for not teaching refugees English while they are in camps overseas. Other countries, including the U.K., start tutoring refugees in a new language far earlier. The U.S. is only experimenting now with classes in Nepal.
and Thailand, as well as Kenya and other parts of Africa, but none in the Middle East.

Mohammed, the refugee now in Elizabeth, N.J., remains weakened from the gunshot wound he suffered as he tried to get belongings out of his home in Syria. The injury makes it difficult for him to get jobs that involve heavy labor, like construction. He’d like to resume his previous career as a chef, but he says his English is not yet good enough to do the work.

Samir Alrshdan, 55, who owned a small factory that employed about a dozen workers in Syria, is in Hamtramck, Michigan, still waiting to begin classes after almost a month in the U.S. “I work on my own with YouTube lessons,” he said.

For most newly-arrived refugees who don’t speak English, their first jobs tend to be in grocery stores, factories and construction, said Mahmoud Mahmoud, director of Church World Service’s branch in New Jersey.

“It’s important to find jobs as soon as possible because that’s just how life is in America, not just for refugees, but for everyone in the U.S.,” said Mahmoud, whose organization is one of the major government-funded charities handling refugees. “You have to keep up with the costs of life. In order to breathe air, you have to work.”

But representatives from some refugee organizations and independent nonprofits have questioned the resettlement program’s emphasis on early employment, citing long-term repercussions.

A long-term study by the Migration Policy Institute found many refugees are quickly finding jobs – and were more likely to be employed than the U.S.-born population. That echoed official government statistics. However, though refugee
incomes rose substantially over time, they earned less compared with native-born Americans, even after 20 years in the U.S.

“A big strength of the resettlement program is its emphasis on rapid employment – it gets refugees speaking English, gives them exposure to jobs, but because they have to go to work right away, they don’t have time for long-term education,” said Randy Capps, one of the authors of the report. “If refugees are not already well-educated, I think there’s a risk that these lower-educated refugee groups get trapped in lower-wage jobs.”

Underemployment of highly skilled refugees also remains a challenge, said Capps.

“A public assistance doesn’t last very long, so they have to work and make ends meet. If they work, it’s going to take a while for them to pursue the certificates they need,” said Capps.

A 2014 study by researchers at the United Conference of Catholic Bishops, another major government-funded resettlement charity, concluded the emphasis on finding jobs quickly overshadows education and other factors necessary for long-term success.

“The almost singular emphasis on self-sufficiency and economic independence, while a laudable objective, risks limiting opportunities,” the authors wrote.

**HOLES IN THE SAFETY NET**

Not all government services provided to refugees are free. After six months, refugees must start repaying the International Organization for Migration, an intergovernmental agency focused on migration, for the costs of flying to the U.S. That is not always easy.
Alrshdan, the former small factory owner in Hamtramck, faces that pressure. After fleeing to a refugee camp in Jordan, his family of nine learned they could head to the U.S.

“That was such an important moment for us,” he said. “It felt like our hearts started beating again.”

Now, after almost five months in Hamtramck, the family must soon repay their bill for flying to the United States. The cost: about $12,000.

“That is quite a burden on us. We’re trying to talk to the government and if we can figure something out,” said Alrshdan.

He has not been able to find work yet because he is still learning English. His 18-year-old son, Mutaz, works for a sign-making company and is the only person supporting the family.

“Even if I have to sell everything I own, I want to pay back this money,” said Alrshdan. “I want to be the perfect citizen here and show gratitude.”

The challenges refugees face in making a living are compounded by holes in the safety net, government audits suggest.

In 2011, the GAO reported that “little is known” about the effectiveness of the Office of Refugee Resettlement efforts to help refugees become self-sufficient—a major goal of the office. The next year, the GAO found that government-funded nonprofits—despite promises to the contrary—do little to coordinate with other community groups such as local schools and health departments. Some local health departments were not notified of refugees coming to their counties, and failed to set up health screenings for them.
The GAO found that this failure to coordinate with local stakeholders resulted in wasted opportunities for other charities to contribute resources, and that at times, *refugees faced a backlash* as a result.

In 2012, the GAO said the State Department also *does little to measure* how well refugees integrate in their new hometowns, leaving them less able to document success and quickly spot – and fix – failures. The State Department *said* it will take steps to resolve these issues. The Department of Health and Human Services agreed with the GAO’s recommendation to better coordinate with community stakeholders.

Monitoring reports by the State Department also paint a portrait of some resettlement agencies that neglect refugees, place them in unsanitary, and at times, unsafe housing, and overly rely on a refugee family’s U.S. ties for support.

At the Catholic Charities of Orange County site in Santa Ana, Calif., State Department monitors interviewed one family who said they felt unsafe in their apartment, which affected the father’s ability to look for work. The family said they had not been visited by a case manager in their first three months in the U.S. and hoped to move to another state — a plan that the case manager did not know about.

The State Department noted at the end of its report that USCCB, one of the main resettlement agencies that manages the contract, should no longer place refugees at that site until the nonprofit could fully comply with requirements.

Diana Gullo, director of immigration services at Catholic Charities of Orange County, told the NYCity News Service that the charity temporarily closed its refugee resettlement program in July 2014. “It was completely an internal decision,” said Gullo, noting that the decision was related to the charity’s lack of internal resources and capacity to sustain its resettlement services. “Our
program went through a lot of changes, and we’re still trying to analyze our capacity to reopen the program.”

Gullo said that the charity had an “open door” through USCCB to restart the refugee resettlement program, but that there are currently no plans to do so. USCCB could not be reached for comment by time of publication.

At World Relief Garden Grove in Garden Grove, Calif., monitors found the nonprofit to only be partially compliant with federal requirements, noting late health screenings and inconsistent documentation of records. Monitors reported that one refugee family had not seen a case manager in their first ten weeks in the U.S., until the day before the State Department came for an interview. World Relief and its affiliate could not be reached for comment by time of publication.

Christopher Coen, who runs Friends of Refugees, a refugee resettlement watchdog blog, says that he has seen the same problems recur in resettlement programs for years, much in part because agencies are not monitored enough.

“It will be years and years before there are monitoring visits from the State Department,” said Coen, who maintains a list of monitoring reports that he regularly requests from the State Department through the Freedom of Information Act.

He also criticized the State Department’s monitoring visits as not being thorough enough. “They select a very small sample, they’ll talk to three or four families, and will look at 15-20 files, written records,” said Coen. “Their inspectors look at the records, then they’ll get a passing grade.”

Bartlett, the director of the State Department’s Office of Refugee Admissions, said he does not see any major problems with the U.S. resettlement program. Still, he added: “We’re always looking to see how we can improve.” 
He noted that resettlement agencies are required to consult with nonprofits and community leaders every quarter. “It’s from that interaction where we learn where the deficiencies are and where we need to put additional work,” Bartlett said.

Bartlett believes the biggest obstacle facing Syrian refugees lies with current public tensions.

“I think the political situation in this country and the situation with perception of Syrian refugees is the largest problem that we’re facing, but certainly one that we feel strongly about,” he said.

“The people that we bring in here are victims of terror who have been pushed out of their country.”