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## **Systemic Overview of the Colorado Refugee Services Program**

### **Acknowledgements**

This paper is based on information generously provided in interviews with Barbara Carr, the Colorado State Refugee Coordinator, Tami Shannon, the Colorado Refugee Services Program Administrator and Laurel Bagan, the recently retired Colorado State Refugee Coordinator. I am deeply appreciative of their assistance. Unless otherwise cited everything in this paper came from them; I hope to do it justice. Reference to refugees, asylees and victims of trafficking, communally as “refugees” is not meant to negate specifics of their experiences, or generalize about the services they might need. It is simply to refer to them as clients of the Colorado Refugee Services Program.

### **Background**

#### *History and Purpose*

The federal government requires every state to identify a location for the state’s refugee coordinator within the state government. The Colorado Refugee Services Program (CRSP) is housed in the Colorado Department of Human Services. CRSP’s stated goal “is to ensure effective resettlement and promote refugee self-sufficiency.”<sup>1</sup> It is responsible for 100 percent of the refugees, asylees and registered victims of trafficking that arrive in Colorado, who resettles approximately one percent of such persons in the US. Since its founding through 2002, CRSP has provided assistance for 38,147 individuals from 73 different countries.<sup>2</sup> Of these, 95 percent were settled in the Denver Metro area, five percent in Colorado Springs and less than one percent in other Colorado locations. CRSP’s 10 full and part-time dedicated employees speak 10 different languages.

Even before CRSP’s founding, Colorado was receiving Southeast Asian refugees. The state was a favored location by returning and retiring U.S. military personnel, and therefore, by extension, also the Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodians displaced by the Vietnam War. Officially, 2155 Southeast Asians came to Colorado in 1975.<sup>3</sup> The actual number was probably higher. The individual and military sponsors assisted with resettlement and most of these refugees ended up on the state welfare rolls. In 1979, with the Cambodian genocide and “boat” exodus the registered population in Colorado swelled to 7049. There were also 107 refugees from Europe, Africa, Mid-East and Latin America residing in Colorado. Nationally, emergency legislation was passed in response to this wave of humanity. Locally, then-Governor Lamm instructed the director of the Colorado Department of Human Services to develop an office of refugee services. With an initial staff of four, CRSP opened for business on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1980.

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<sup>1</sup> CRSP literature, Refugee 201: Conference Handbook

<sup>2</sup> CRSP literature. Two groups, Hmong and Amerasians, are listed distinctly and are not affiliated with a specific country of origin.

<sup>3</sup> CRSP literature.

Almost from its inception, CRSP steered away from a heavy hierarchical structure. Colorado's cabinet level refugee task force, conceived to provide department cooperation and legitimacy to CRSP, was disbanded early on because it lacked accountability. While some top-down management was necessary, CRSP increasingly looked to its clients, the refugees, as culturally knowledgeable potential service providers. In 1982, when the federal government allowed more experimental welfare management ideas, CRSP was already laying the groundwork for a refugee network system. However, developing the required mutual respect and trust between refugees, voluntary agencies and the state was a slow process. In 1992, after four years of planning, a long-term strategic planning group submitted their report. After another four years of coordinated evolution, the present horizontal structure coalesced. The idea was to engage refugees' expertise, their participation, and aid their empowerment in a broad capacity building system. The horizontal networking of private non-profit voluntary and service providing agencies is designed to protect and insulate these services from political issues.

### *Funding*

CRSP is funded by the US Department of Health and Human Service's Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS & ORR). As expressed to me by Barbara Carr, the Colorado State Refugee Coordinator, three potential areas of concern are the financial situation faced by the dependency on federal funds, inadequate attention to youth services, and inadequate attention to mental health services.

### **Program Overview**

#### *Projects*

Colorado practices the Wilson/Fish Alternative form of refugee services administration. This means that the services refugees receive in their first year are administered and provided separately from similar services provided the general US population. During the first year, these services are monitored by CRSP, but CRSP contracts with four local voluntary agencies to serve and coordinate services for the refugees. These agencies are:

- Jewish Family Services
- Lutheran Family Services
- Ecumenical Refugee Services
- African Community Center

*Source: Refugee 201: Conference Handbook*

Voluntary agency's caseworkers meet refugees at the airport and take them to rented housing. Caseworkers provide the necessary orientation and assistance for all the refugee's resettlement issues. The refugees receive an initial State Department Reception and Placement Grant for the first month. But as self-sufficiency is the goal, ORR cash assistance is limited to the first eight months. Self-sufficiency is defined as supporting oneself and family above the poverty line. To this end, Voluntary agency caseworkers facilitate English as a Second Language (ESL), driving lessons, vocational training and employment coaching through affiliated agencies. Social services, health, mental health, and legal assistance are also available the same way. During this period, CRSP monitors the situation with each

refugee and, where needed, steps in and reassigns the individual. Possible reasons for reassignment are political or ethnic incompatibility between an individual refugee and their caseworker or agency.

After one year, the voluntary agencies step aside and any additional, non-cash, assistance is provided directly by CRSP. This may include comprehensive employment services, health services, ESL and driver's education, crisis intervention and coordination with the mainstream state social service providers. Refugees are eligible for assistance from CRSP for five years after their arrival in the U.S.

### *Individual Projects*

CRSP, the voluntary agencies and several other service providers comprise the Colorado Refugee Network Council. The Council's function is to share information, coordinate, organize, and plan. Issues of refugee needs and advocacy must be endlessly reconciled with state and national policies, local agency goals and budgets.<sup>4</sup> The Colorado Refugee Network Council meets monthly to diplomatically address the concerns of refugees and the agencies that serve them in Colorado.

The Colorado Refugee Resettlement Network comprises 99 organizations or agencies and 151 individuals. It theoretically includes anyone who is interested in refugees in Colorado. This May 30<sup>th</sup> CRSP will sponsor a second annual one-day conference in response to the information needs of this larger community. The first conference, titled *Refugee 101*, was held last year for the benefit of schools, police, and social service agencies. The questions answered were:

Who are refugees?

Where do they come from?

Are they here legally?

What services are they eligible for?

General fear and apprehension concerning refugees in the workplace and classroom also were addressed.

This year's conference, *Refugee 201*, will offer the same general information and add specific topics: cultural barriers for employers and co-workers refugees, employment training opportunities, immigration concerns, Title VI issues (equal access to federally funded services), and hopefully address the present challenges faced by the network.

### **Key Accomplishments**

Every year the President determines the number of refugees that should be allowed in the US, and Congressional approval of this number is required before anyone is admitted. This year the ceiling was set at 70,000 people.<sup>5</sup> Last year, because of post 9/11/01 homeland security concerns and the national preoccupation with war, only 27,000 people were

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<sup>4</sup> CRSP literature

<sup>5</sup> Presidential Determination No. 2003-02 October 16, 2002

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/10/20021016-18.html>

admitted. This year might see even fewer. This precipitous decline is reflected in Colorado's numbers as well. Traditionally, Colorado accepts about 1200 people per year; for the year April 2002 to April 2003, Colorado placed only 210 refugees.

### **Policy Recommendations**

All of CRSP's funding is federal so the Colorado state budget deficit cannot affect the program, but the transition of federal administration of DHHS into the new Department of Homeland Security meant a ten percent cut across the top of CRSP's funding. Furthermore, the federal funds are based on three-year averages of the number of individuals resettled in Colorado. Now in the second year of decreased refugee arrivals since 9/11/01, that three-year average bodes very ominously for CRSP, the Colorado voluntary agencies and the refugees attempting to establish new lives for themselves in Colorado. Obviously, a sudden influx of refugees would strain the system, but budget cuts could also affect the breadth of services available to the refugees already here.

As refugee families acculturate, the children, preteens and teens, most submersed in American culture via school, are frequently thrust into the role of culture brokers. Their prominence in this role is exacerbated by their "conscription" as translators. Intense stress can develop when children become the mediators of seemingly irreconcilable cultural differences. Additionally, adolescents often feel pressure of achieving the "American dream" after possibly drastic sacrifices made by the families to reach the US.

The lack of affordable mental health services affects the refugee population as it affects the greater society. Testament is the percentage of indigent individuals with mental illness. Feeing alone puts refugees, especially trafficking victims and political asylees, at markedly higher rates of PTSD and other psychological problems. Incident rates of sexual assault, rape and torture can be staggering. Compounding the difficulty in treating these individuals are language and cultural barriers that may distort, mitigate or exacerbate symptoms.

### **Sources:**

Bagan, Laurie; Colorado State Refugee Coordinator - Retired, Interview on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2003

Carr, Barbara; Colorado State Refugee Coordinator, Interview on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2003, follow-up on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2003

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*Refugee 201: Conference Handbook*, Colorado Refugee Services Program

Shannon, Tami; Colorado Refugee Services Program Administrator, Interview on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2003, follow-up on May 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, 2003

US Department of Health and Human Services: Office of Refugee Resettlement  
<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/wilfishalt.htm>