

## FINDINGS FROM THE EVALUATION OF THE REFUGEE SOCIAL SERVICE (RSS) AND TARGETED ASSISTANCE FORMULA GRANT (TAG) PROGRAMS

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This brief summarizes findings from The Lewin Group's evaluation of the Refugee Social Service (RSS) and Targeted Assistance Formula Grant (TAG) programs. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) administers these programs and sponsored an evaluation to assess how program services are delivered and how refugees who receive them fare over time.

RSS and TAG provide employability and other services to refugees and certain other eligible groups to help them achieve economic self-sufficiency soon after entering the country. Refugees are a diverse group, arriving in the United States under various circumstances and possessing a wide range of education and skills; many face a number of challenges finding jobs quickly while adjusting to a new country. RSS and TAG services aim at helping them overcome these barriers to employment and integration into the United States.

The study focused on refugees in three sites—Houston, Miami, and Sacramento—who entered the country between 2000 and 2004, were between the ages of 18 and 55 at entry, and received RSS or TAG services at some point in one of the three study sites. It relied on administrative and programmatic data, a survey of refugees, and information collected through interviews with service providers and focus groups with program participants.

## THE REFUGEE PROGRAMS OPERATE UNDER DIVERSE CIRCUMSTANCES

Refugee programs adapt their processes to serve the different groups of refugees they resettle and the different policy contexts in which they operate. Some communities, such as Houston, resettle a continually changing population, requiring the service agency to be adept at understanding newly arriving refugees' cultural experiences and helping them attain self-sufficiency within a short period of time. Other communities resettle a population that varies less over time and can rely on family and community support to assist with service delivery. The sidebar describes the different refugee populations in each site.

## Characteristics of Refugees in the Three Sites

*(Arrivals between 2000 and 2004)*

### Houston

- Forty percent arrived from Sudan, Somalia, Liberia, and other African countries; more than 20 percent came from Cuba; others came from Vietnam, Bosnia, and the Middle East; more than 30 different languages are spoken by refugees
- Most arrivals are free cases (i.e., are not joining family members)
- More than one-fifth of RSS and TAG participants had never attended school when they arrived in the United States; most illiterate refugees are African
- About half of RSS and TAG participants arrive unmarried

### Miami

- Cubans represent 88 percent of arrivals, with some arrivals from Colombia, Haiti, and Venezuela
- Most arrivals in Miami are Cuban/Haitian entrants or asylees who are not resettled by a refugee resettlement agency
- Most RSS and TAG participants (80 percent) have high school educations, and many have professional degrees
- About 46 percent of RSS and TAG participants are married; 14 percent had previously been married

### Sacramento

- Arrivals from Ukraine, Moldova, Russia, and other countries of the former Soviet Union make up 86 percent of arrivals; a large number of Hmong (originally from Laos) arrived in 2004
- Sacramento primarily resettles family reunification cases
- Slavic refugees tend to have some education; the Hmong lack formal education or have only primary education
- Three-quarters of refugees served are married, and most of these couples have children

In addition, welfare systems differ from state to state. Houston and Miami are in states that offer low welfare benefits relative to other states, making it difficult for refugees to subsist on public assistance, and the TANF programs in these two states have a strong work-first emphasis. In Sacramento, on the other hand, TANF benefits are comparatively high; there is more government assistance such as child care, Medicaid, and disability assistance; and TANF recipients have more flexibility to pursue education activities, including English as a Second Language (ESL), to fulfill their work requirements.

## PROGRAMS TAKE DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO DELIVERING SERVICES

States have different structures for providing cash assistance and social services to refugees. Florida and most counties in California operate publicly-administered programs in which the voluntary resettlement agencies (Volags) that provide “reception and placement” services to newly arriving refugees refer the new arrivals to welfare agencies for cash and medical assistance. The welfare agency then refers the refugees to RSS and TAG providers for employability services.

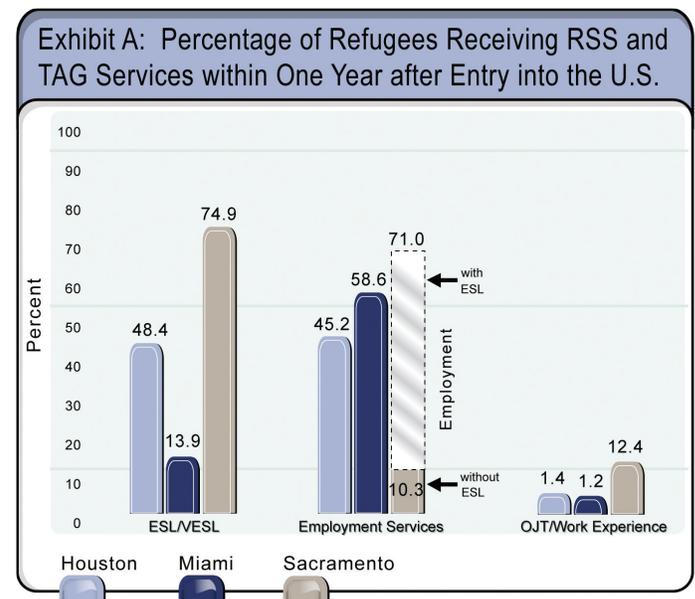
Texas, on the other hand, operates a “public/private partnership” (PPP), meaning the state has contracted with the Volags to directly provide cash assistance to refugees. The Volag also arranges for the refugees to receive Food Stamps and Medicaid assistance, and generally provides the RSS and TAG services as well.

The different approaches may reflect the populations served and the differences in welfare policies. Texas receives a diverse and changing group of refugees, and Volags generally have a level of cultural competency needed to effectively serve them that the state lacks. The other sites receive relatively stable groups of refugees, so welfare offices and other service agencies have been able to develop the cultural understanding required to serve those particular populations. In addition, the PPP arrangement allows Texas to provide refugees greater cash assistance benefits for a limited time than would otherwise be allowed through TANF.

## THE PROGRAMS HAVE DIFFERENT PHILOSOPHIES REGARDING THE EMPHASIS OF ESL INSTRUCTION VERSUS RAPID EMPLOYMENT

In all sites, non-English-speaking refugees have been able to find employment, but to advance in the workplace they need to learn English. The three sites take different approaches to providing both employment services and ESL. Exhibit A shows what services the refugees received.

- Houston emphasizes rapid employment, and while they refer many refugees to ESL instruction, Volags work closely with the refugees to help them get job interviews and find employment while they are receiving ESL.
- Miami providers also emphasize rapid employment. Because Spanish-speaking individuals can find employment in Miami without learning English, many delay participating in ESL.
- Sacramento providers emphasize learning English before moving into employment. While employment services are often included as part of the ESL component, only 10 percent received employment services alone. Refugees received OJT or work experience more frequently than in the other sites.



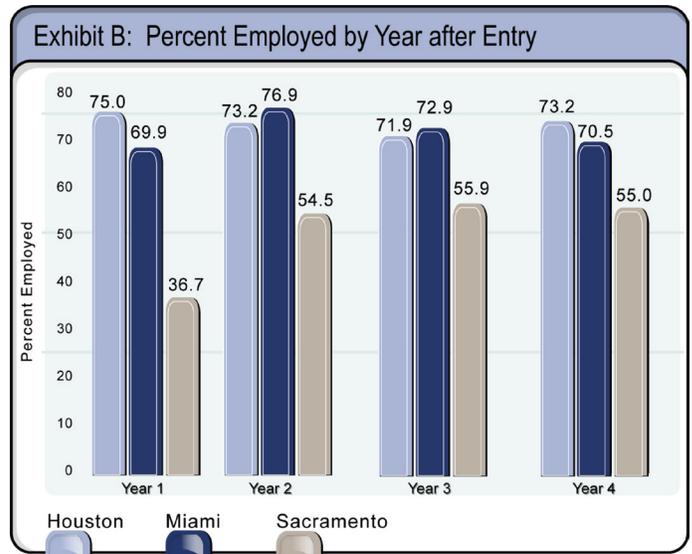
Source: RSS and TAG program data provided by states.  
 Note: The Sacramento Employment Services shaded bar shows services provided exclusive of ESL; the gray bar adds students in vocational ESL (VESL).

## THE VAST MAJORITY OF REFUGEES WHO RECEIVE RSS AND TAG SERVICES ARE ABLE TO FIND EMPLOYMENT, AND THEIR WAGES INCREASE OVER TIME

Unemployment insurance (UI) wage records show that about three-quarters of refugees were working in UI-covered employment in Houston and Miami each year. About half were employed in Sacramento. (See Exhibit B.) The survey of refugees found higher rates of employment than the UI records. At the time the survey was conducted (between September 2006 and March 2007), 78 percent in Houston,

86 percent in Miami, and 70 percent in Sacramento reported being employed. The difference in employment rates from the two sources suggests that many were employed in non-UI covered jobs (e.g., domestic work, informal child care, and landscaping services).

Wages for refugees are generally low, although they progress over time. The median wage of respondents to the client survey in their current job ranged from \$9 to \$11.50 an hour in each site. As shown in Exhibit C, most of the survey respondents who had worked more than one job had seen notable increases in wages.



Source: State unemployment insurance wage records.

### Exhibit C: Estimated Annual Percent Increase in Wages of Current and First Jobs

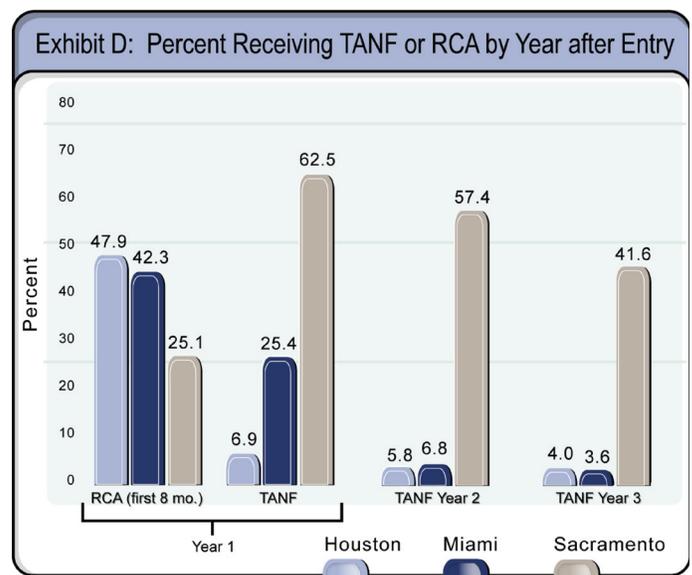
City	Hourly Median Wages		Wages Difference (\$)	Average annual percent increase
	First job (\$)	Current job (\$)		
Houston	6.74	9.00	2.26	9.0
Miami	6.50	9.08	2.58	11.8
Sacramento	8.00	11.50	3.50	13.9

Source: Refugee Assistance Survey.  
Note: Calculated annual percent increase among those with at least one year elapsed between jobs.

### CASH ASSISTANCE USE DECREASES OVER TIME, BUT VARIES BY SITE

The RSS and TAG programs aim to help refugees achieve economic self-sufficiency soon after entering the country; one measure is how quickly they stop receiving government assistance. Cash assistance receipt decreased over time in all three sites, but a higher share of refugees in Sacramento continued to receive TANF assistance relative to the other two sites. (See Exhibit D. RCA refers to Refugee Cash Assistance, which is assistance available to refugees without dependents for a limited time after entry.)

Several factors contribute to this finding. As noted above, California provides a comparatively high TANF benefit, which allows refugees, like other TANF recipients, to work and still be eligible for cash assistance. Also, TANF is only available for families with children, and Sacramento has a higher share of refugees with dependent children.



Source: State TANF and RCA administrative data.

## OVERALL, FAMILY INCOME WAS MODEST FOR ALL THREE SITES

Exhibit E presents survey data on the overall monthly income of refugees and their spouses. Sacramento's income was higher both because earnings were higher and the families received more in government assistance. Annualized, the typical refugee family in these three sites had a yearly income somewhere between \$21,000 to \$25,000 a year.

Excluding Food Stamp benefits (a noncash benefit not included in the typical poverty calculation), the total income ranged from \$20,000 and \$23,000 a year, approximately equivalent to the 2006 poverty threshold for a family of four (\$20,614 in 2006) and low relative to median household income in the United States (\$72,870 in 2006 for a family of four, according to Census Bureau data).

## PROMISING PRACTICES AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Overall, the study found that most refugees, even the ones with the most significant barriers to employment, found employment and left cash assistance, but that their family income is modest. While the wide diversity of refugee programs means that a study in three sites cannot serve as a national assessment of how refugees are served in the United States, the study identified several promising strategies for serving the refugees among these experienced

sites. These include coordinating services across all service providers, experimenting with methods to provide easily accessible ESL instruction where they live and work, developing credentialing programs to help them transfer skills learned in their native country, and relying on staff and organizations in the community that have the cultural competence to serve them effectively.

The study also identified several opportunities for future research:

- Conducting studies in additional communities with characteristics or service delivery arrangements different than the three included in this study;
- Evaluating the most effective approaches to delivering services (public administration, PPP, or other alternative arrangements), perhaps through a random assignment experiment;
- Evaluating the impact of ESL instruction on refugees' employment and self-sufficiency and different strategies for providing them;
- Following the outcomes of refugees over a longer study period to learn whether they improve their human capital and find better jobs, how their children fare over time, and how the refugees and children adjust to life in the United States; and
- Studying new populations of refugees arriving in the United States in the next few years.

### Exhibit E: Average Monthly Income (Refugee and Spouse)

Income Measure (\$)	Houston	Miami	Sacramento
Earnings	1,619	1,653	1,695
Cash assistance	19	15	148
Food Stamps	54	25	122
Disability income	29	7	90
Unemployment compensation	8	10	8
Other income	9	31	17
Total income	1,738	1,742	2,080

Source: Refugee Assistance Survey.

## For Further Information

This brief summarizes the findings of the following five reports:

**MARY FARRELL, BRET BARDEN, AND MIKE MUELLER**

*The Evaluation of the Refugee Social Service (RSS) and Targeted Assistance Formula Grant (TAG) Programs: Synthesis of Findings from Three Sites*

<http://www.lewin.com/content/publications/3871.pdf>

**RANDY CAPPS, WITH BRET BARDEN, EVERETT HENDERSON, AND MIKE MUELLER**

*The Evaluation of the Refugee Social Service (RSS) and Targeted Assistance Formula Grant (TAG) Programs: Houston Case Study*

<http://www.lewin.com/content/publications/3872.pdf>

**NANCY PINDUS, WITH BRET BARDEN, EVERETT HENDERSON, AND MIKE MUELLER**

*The Evaluation of the Refugee Social Service (RSS) and Targeted Assistance Formula Grant (TAG) Programs: Miami Case Study*

<http://www.lewin.com/content/publications/3874.pdf>

**SAM ELKIN, WITH BRET BARDEN AND MIKE MUELLER**

*The Evaluation of the Refugee Social Service (RSS) and Targeted Assistance Formula Grant (TAG) Programs: Sacramento Case Study*

<http://www.lewin.com/content/publications/3875.pdf>

**DEMETRA SMITH NIGHTINGALE**

*A Framework for Continuous Evaluation of Office of Refugee Resettlement Formula Programs Supporting Employability Services*

<http://www.lewin.com/content/publications/3873.pdf>

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