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Doing Right by Newly Arriving Refugees

BUREAU OF POPULATION, REFUGEES, AND MIGRATION

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Dear Colleagues:

Right now, it is difficult for humanitarians to focus on much more than the devastation in Haiti, and our Bureau is working closely with USAID and others on the effort to provide life-sustaining assistance to the affected population. At the same time, a broad array of humanitarian programs supported by the U.S. Government continue to provide critical aid to populations around the world, and I wanted to take a moment to offer important news about one such effort: the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.

When I took the job as Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration in July, it was with a keen awareness of Secretary Clinton's commitment to elevate U.S. efforts to address refugee issues, and my own responsibilities as the new steward of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). Every year, the United States provides resettlement opportunities to thousands of the world's most vulnerable refugees, in a program endorsed by the President (and every President since 1980) through an annual determination. This program, which resettled nearly 75,000 refugees in the United States in 2009, reflects our own tradition as a nation of immigrants and refugees. It is an important, enduring and ongoing expression of our commitment to international humanitarian principles. The program also imposes upon us a solemn responsibility to address effectively the basic needs of refugees during their first days in our country. And while we cannot guarantee their success, we must provide sufficient support to ensure refugees are able to get on their feet during their first weeks and months here – and move quickly toward becoming independent, productive members of their new communities.



A Sudanese refugee family arrives at the airport. UNHCR Photo

Early in my tenure, I visited Chicago, Fort Wayne, IN and Minneapolis/St. Paul, to learn more about our efforts to meet the needs of newly arriving refugees – Bhutanese, Burmese, Burundians, Hmong, Iraqis and so many others. What I saw was both heartening and dismaying. It was so gratifying to witness the deep and abiding commitment to refugees among overworked and underpaid agency personnel in the field, the determination of new arrivals, and the welcoming spirit of local school, healthcare and government officials. On the other hand, it was very sad to meet with refugees who had severe problems that go well beyond the challenges that any new refugee might expect to confront. I heard from refugees threatened with eviction after only months in the United States. I learned that refugees often had to choose between buying food or diapers for their children. And I spoke with agency field staff overburdened by the number of refugee families they serve and the complexity of the resettlement service needs of recent arrivals.

The Reception and Placement Program administered by the Department of State includes a one-time per capita grant for the initial weeks after arrival, but the grant has declined in real terms by more than 50% since its inception some decades ago. This is a primary reason for the problems that I witnessed which have been documented and publicized in a variety of assessments over the past waters of the problem of the problem

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available to the program is simply insufficient to do a quality job of initial resettlement. And in my own review of this issue, I heard repeatedly from all stakeholders -- agencies, congressional staff, and PRM Admissions office officials -- that our level of this short term support must increase substantially.

In light of our critical obligations on these issues, PRM will increase the Reception and Placement per capita grant from \$900 to \$1,800, which will be effective as of January 1, 2010. This is intended to address challenges refugees face in their first 30-90 days in the United States. It will directly benefit refugees and the network of local non-profit affiliates that serve them. This would not have been possible without the generous support of Congress, which has been steadfast in its endorsement of the USRAP, as well as support from the National Security Council and others in the Administration.



Refugee children in their new school in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. UNHCR Photo

The bulk of the increase, at least \$1,100, will be designated for direct support of refugees – so that in the first weeks after their arrival, they have a roof over their heads, a clean bed in which to sleep and basic assistance. Affiliates providing aid to refugees will have some flexibility in how those funds are allocated, and will also be able to use up to \$700 per capita to meet costs related to management of this program. This \$700 figure -- about a 50% increase over the current management ceiling -- should address the need to lower client-to-staff ratios, support positions to coordinate volunteers or develop private resources for Reception and Placement, or otherwise improve the quality of Reception and Placement services received by refugees.

While a critical component of overall program improvements, this funding increase is only part of the answer. As many of you know, the White House is leading a comprehensive review of the refugee resettlement program, and PRM will remain deeply engaged in this effort.

Many thanks, and kind regards, Eric Schwartz

Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration

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