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Refugee Resettlement in Salt Lake City and Portland

BUREAU OF POPULATION, REFUGEES, AND MIGRATION
September 22, 2010

Dear Friends and Colleagues:

I wanted to report to you on my September 7-8 visit to Salt Lake City and Portland, to meet with resettled refugees, state and local officials involved in refugee resettlement, resettlement agency representatives and others who are concerned and engaged in these issues in both communities. I was delighted to be accompanied for the Portland portion of my trip by U.S. Senator Jeff Merkley. In addition, Barbara Day of PRM's Admissions staff joined me for both portions of the visit.

Both cities are great models of our public-private partnership, supported by volunteers who are deeply committed to the humanitarian mission of resettlement and by communities that strongly support the effort. They host Bhutanese, Iraqis, Burundians, Burmese, Congolese and many other refugee groups, and continually seek to enhance the support provided to new arrivals. It was gratifying to hear that the State Department's doubling of the reception and placement grant – provided to support refugees for the first one to three months after their arrivals – has dramatically enhanced the ability of local agencies to provide critical initial support to refugees.

But however encouraging it was to hear these kind comments, they can't allow us to be complacent about ongoing challenges. It's now time to consider more actively other ways we can further ease the burdens that resettled refugees continue to confront as they try to make their way in our country. Thus, let me offer a number of observations coming out of this latest trip, which I believe should inform our efforts over time.



Senator Jeff Merkley and A/S Schwartz exchanging views with resettled refugees over lunch in Portland.
State Department photo, September 8, 2010

Case management: Supported by funding from the State of Utah, Salt Lake City has adopted a two-year, case-management approach, in which voluntary agency case workers formally sustain their intensive engagement with newly arrived refugees not for several months (as is generally the case in other states), but, rather, for two years. The initial reports from assistance providers – and the anecdotes I received from refugees – are that this system greatly enhances the ability of the refugee, over time, to access services effectively, and increases his or her overall sense of well-being. This makes sense to me. If a new arrival knows that he or she can call on someone for help, and knows that the help will be there for more than a very short period of time, it makes a big difference. In prior domestic trips to

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meet with resettled refugees, I had been struck by the absence of longer term case management given the vulnerabilities of this population, so the Salt Lake City innovation seems like an important contribution that could serve as a model for others.

Overseas cultural orientation: Despite the State Department's efforts to enhance our overseas cultural orientation programs for refugees who will be traveling to the United States, I continued to hear reports from refugees that the pre-departure process did not give them an adequate sense of—and preparation for—the challenges they would be confronting after arrival. PRM's Admissions team is currently engaged in a critical review of our cultural orientation programs worldwide, which I expect will help us make significant improvements this coming year.



A/S Schwartz hears about personal experiences of young people who have been resettled in Salt Lake City from many regions of the world. State Department photo, September 7, 2010.

English-language training for new arrivals: The most critical obstacle for successful integration of refugees may be lack of English language proficiency. Thus, it is essential that newly arriving refugees have access to the English language training that will enable them to enter the workforce and contribute to their local communities. In Salt Lake City, in Portland, and in the other cities I've visited over the past year, I heard repeatedly that even when English language programs were available, they could not be easily accessed by refugees compelled to find employment as quickly as possible. Some local communities have developed innovative English language training efforts linked to the workplace, but we at the federal level should consider ways to facilitate such innovations.

Learning from best practices: Whether it is intensive case management in Salt Lake City, rules in Minnesota that enable refugees to take the time necessary to access language training and other social services without sacrificing benefits, or voluntary agency use of health care workers to address complicated issues of health care access, it is clear that there are dozens of places around the country where important innovations are being implemented. It is also clear to me that we need to establish opportunities by which communities can better share information on these best practices, so all resettled refugees can benefit from ideas being generated in localities around the nation.

In the weeks and months ahead, we will pursue action in these and other areas, and, as always, we at PRM would very much welcome your observations and perspectives.

Kind regards,
Eric Schwartz
Assistant Secretary of State
Population, Refugees, and Migration

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