

welcome

Summer 2010

Special Edition

A high standard of service: celebrating the R&P increase

Public-private partnership is the genius of the U.S. refugee resettlement program, but over the years the partnership fell out of balance so that the private sector was bearing most of the cost. This year, that changed!

More than 70,000 refugees are resettled to the United States each year in a partnership that includes Church World Service and nine other national voluntary agencies (VOLAGs), along with several U.S. government agencies, among them the U.S. State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM). PRM provides funding for the initial reception, placement and support of refugees newly resettled to the United States.

Before January 1, 2010, PRM allocated \$900 in a one-time Reception and Placement (“R&P”) Grant per new refugee arrival. CWS allocated \$450 for the refugee’s direct expenses and \$450 for the local agency to provide resettlement services. But \$900 is only a fraction of what refugee resettlement actually costs.

For several years, the national and local resettlement VOLAGs have been working through the Refugee Council USA (RCUSA) with PRM to recognize the problem and to suggest and implement solutions. With Jen Smyers, CWS Associate for Immigration and Refugee Policy, chairing the RCUSA Advocacy Committee, CWS has been a leader in that work.

Effective January 1, 2010, PRM doubled the per capita R&P Grant for the resettlement of refugees to \$1,800, including at least \$900 per refugee upon arrival, \$700 for resettlement services and a per capita “flex



*CWS resettled Binod Pradhan, his wife Ganga and their daughter Yogita, refugees from Bhutan, to Greensboro, N.C., in January. Binod started work at his first full-time U.S. job in March. Here, he proudly displays his first paycheck. **Photo by Chuck Guarracino.***

amount” of \$200 for the local agency’s allocation to new arrivals with greater needs.

The new per capita grant better balances government and voluntary sector support for the U.S. refugee resettlement program – and is much fairer to refugees.

During its annual national conference June 1-4 in Miami, Fla., the Church World Service Immigration and Refugee Program (CWS/IRP) asked its denominational and affiliate colleagues to tell their stories about the impact the increased per cap is having on their work. Here is a selection.

Naomi Madsen, Program Manager, Refugee Ministry Office, United Methodist Committee on Relief, New York, New York, and Chair, CWS/IRP Committee



My clients are churches and the CWS affiliates, the people in the resettlement agencies. We work with our churches to get them engaged with the affiliates so they can come alongside and help, and when there's an emergency we have funds we can provide for emergency grants.

That's where I started to see the difference, a year, 18 months ago, when the economy tanked and things started getting really difficult. I would be getting calls from people at the affiliates looking for emergency grants to help refugees to keep them out of homeless shelters. We never thought anything like that could happen and it was happening.

And I was hearing not just discouragement, but as things got worse in the economy, I was hearing despair. The people who

do refugee resettlement would have exhausted everything they could think of to help these families. The situation was becoming desperate. People who'd been doing refugee resettlement for over 20 years were saying, "This is almost impossible."

And I was getting calls from churches, too, people who were helping refugees, who would call and say, "What is going on?" There was anger, they were saying, "This isn't right. How can we be doing this? This is America. We should not be treating refugees this way. We are doing everything we can for our

refugee friends and it's not enough and we're being told there's nothing else to help." So it was pretty desperate. But it's much better now.

One of the things I'm hearing from colleagues at the affiliate level is that now they have room to breathe and room to think about how best to do their job rather than about how to rescue their programs and their clients from disaster. Being rescued from disaster is a wonderful thing but that shouldn't be the standard. This is America. We can do better than that. And the R&P increase is allowing us to do better than that.

Vesna Vila, Program Manager, Sponsors Organized to Assist Refugees (SOAR), Portland, Oregon



The increase in funding gives us a great opportunity to do some savings for clients who were underfunded. As a site with a lot of single cases and couples it was always difficult

to cover for the simple things we need to provide. We were never able to do an extremely good job. I'm not saying we didn't provide, we did provide the services, but it was really very hard.

The flex account is a great, great idea. I'm really so happy, especially about the flex account.

I want to thank everyone who worked on this and gave us the opportunity to have something like that. We are finally able to distribute the money fairly among the refugees who are coming.

**Chris George, Director,
Integrated Refugee and
Immigrant Services, New
Haven, Connecticut**



Refugees were arriving, and when we told them what the rent was for this very modest apartment we put them into, they couldn't believe it. So they immediately went into a state of panic, asking, "How am I going to pay rent? How am I going to pay utilities? Will I really be able to get a job next month?"

You can't expect a refugee to get a job in one, two or even three months under current economic conditions. They were so nervous about their future, their ability to get a job, and their lack of money that it was paralyzing them. They weren't able to learn English, or focus on helping their kids through their first weeks in school. Tell me, what parent can accept that?

With the increased funding, we've been able to help them relax a bit, focus on their health care needs, focus on learning English, prepare for work, help the other members of their family, and help their kids adjust through school.

The increase allows us to provide that high standard of service that refugees deserve and need when they come to this country.



*CWS clients Ban Win (left) and Thin Gye wait for the bus in Durham, N.C.
Photo by Joanna Schiestl.*



**Mary St. John, Director,
CWS North Carolina
Immigration and Refugee
Program, Durham**



With the extra funding we are able to do things like provide three months of bus passes. Before, we couldn't do that. We'd tell refugees, "Learn to ride the bus," but where was the money for the bus ticket? It's \$1 one way for a bus ticket. Now we can buy a monthly pass for three months in a row for every adult in the case.

And that means they can ride all around the city and learn so much. They can take the bus to the library, to different grocery stores, to ethnic groceries, and to look for jobs. ***One way the extra funding clearly translates into integration is in terms of a bus pass, a simple thing like that.***

Here is another story. A family arrived this spring that includes two mentally challenged adults, one so disabled she can't even speak in her own language; an elderly person, and a couple and their three children. With the R&P increase and the discretionary portion of that, we were able to provide \$2,000 each to the mentally challenged people and the elder, plus \$900 to each of the others. That money will help them cope as they make their way.

Safia Jama, Family Advocate, Refugee Resettlement and Immigration Services of Atlanta, Decatur, Georgia



I work with difficult cases like single mothers, sick people. Before the increase I was going to mosques and churches begging for money for rent. I don't have to do that now. We are not scrambling when people come.

I do orientation and before the increase, I was saying, like, "You have to be self-sufficient in 90 days. Your Social Security will come in four or five weeks. You have to get a job. Chop, chop." People were frightened, thinking, "I came here, I don't even know how to get to the office, and this woman is asking me to get a job." And it was difficult.

Now we can pay two to three months' rent. People have more time to learn English, become accustomed to the culture, learn to take the train. It's more relaxed than it was before. We still insist you have to be self-sufficient. ***In fact, people are getting jobs quicker now because they know the rent's covered and they can save money for other things, better things.*** It motivates refugees to get jobs faster.

Craig Thoresen, Director, Refugee and Immigration Services, Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest, Phoenix/Tucson, Arizona



The shortage of resources before was a really unfair handicap to refugees. It was a very short and unrealistic period of time that people were required to get up and running. It's not only being relocated across the world but getting a Social Security card, getting immunizations and other health needs taken care of, getting the kids enrolled in school, making that transition and finding your way in a new country and community. It takes time.

With the increase, we've been able to lengthen that time. And

the results are really dramatic. It's still rushed. Resettlement is not easy. People are rebuilding their lives, starting in a strange country with a new language, new expectations, new places of work and employment, new institutions. But it helps. People are a little more at ease knowing they have a little more time.

For example, with the prior per capita grant, we could probably guarantee singles, a couple or a family of three 30 days, or if they were lucky 60 days, of initial rent payment. If you think about it, most people aren't able to get a Social Security card within 30 days so they can't even get a job.

With the new per capita amount, every one of our arriving cases will have the rent paid for three months. Also, we can provide better furniture and cultural items like tea kettles, rice cookers, little things that make them feel a little more comfortable.



Furniture for a refugee family arriving soon to Durham, N.C. Photo by Joanna Schiestl.

Augustin Ntabaganymana, Manager, Resettlement Program, Lutheran Social Services of New England, Concord, New Hampshire



Lack of funding has been a key word for many years. Instead of thinking about the future, refugees have had to think about, “How am I going pay for my rent tomorrow?” We welcome the recent increase because many of those distresses are being alleviated. We can see the change in the behavior, and the integration for refugees has improved dramatically.

Our office is now able to provide driver’s education to refugees

thanks to the recent increase in funding. ***When one refugee is driving, probably 10 more have access to transportation to go food shopping, take their kids to school, go to work, go to medical appointments.***

In addition, we used to provide only one blanket per each bed in the household. The worst thing you can have is a refugee saying, “I’m cold at night.” It sounds basic but it makes a huge difference in a refugee’s life.

Abigail Stoutimore, Volunteer, Donations and Community Education Coordinator, Concord



Before the funding increase, It was really important for us to always keep in mind, “At least our families are coming here and are safe.” But there were times our staff members would cry at their desks and ask, “Why are we doing this? People are coming here and they are safe but they don’t have a quality of life that’s humane.”

One of the most heartbreaking things for me was clients who couldn’t afford toiletries, toilet paper, shampoo, soap for their kids Our clients coming through now with this new funding are much more at peace than the families that came through when it

was just \$450 per person. They don’t worry about how to send the kids off to school clean or provide for extra needs that aren’t covered by food stamps. ***It’s really wonderful to know you can say, “This will be taken care of for you while you are adjusting for these first few months of your new life.”***

One of the most profound moments for me was very small. We had a family come in that had

an infant, and I said, “Oh my gosh, I can go to the store and I can buy them a brand new car seat. That was always one of those things that was so difficult to provide for a family because they are pricy. And yet that’s one of those things you can’t get donated used because it’s not safe.

And to be able to go to the store and buy a bright pink car seat for a baby girl was a really exciting moment for us.

CWS Concord, N.H., client Happy, on her way from the airport to her new home, safe in her bright pink car seat. **Photo by Abigail Stoutimore.**



Beth May, Reception and Placement Coordinator, CWS Immigration and Refugee Program, Lancaster, Pennsylvania



Before the increase we'd get a couple or two individuals, perhaps two brothers, and to rent an apartment in Lancaster, even a one bedroom apartment, would be \$450 or more. By the time the refugees arrived the entire grant would be spent. They were starting out with a barely furnished apartment, just the very basics which we struggled to put in, and no more resettlement grant. That's extremely demoralizing, it's hard for the staff, it's uncomfortable for the refugee, because we know we have to use donation money or other sources of money just to make the first couple months' rent.

For the past three years we've been resettling Burmese refugees – Karen, Karenni and Chin. They have very little exposure to Western culture. They don't always know how to use what's in an apartment, and don't speak the language. It's so important to have somebody there to show you how to live in America and how to be successful. Without that I can imagine how scary it would be and how much I would flounder trying to live life in a new place. With

the extra funds we feel confident in how we are going to provide for them in the first couple months and give them greater dignity because they have more than just the basics.

The funding increase also allowed us to increase our sponsorship developer position to full time and incorporate volunteer management, which has really helped us increase our volunteer span and be better prepared to use volunteers to help refugees.

Elizabeth Kaznak, Director, Kentucky Refugee Ministries, Louisville



The per capita increase has made a huge impact all across the board. We've been able to secure housing in areas where we were not able to resettle folks before; not that it's that much more expensive, but when you're

dealing with very tight budgets, you just don't want to take a chance, even if it's 25 to 50 dollars more, to go into some areas.

We were able to get two new housing apartment complexes in another area of town on a different bus route, which we believe will open up even more potential for new employment. So being able to be on a bus line to a whole other area of town is a big deal.

We are very conscientious about using the flex money to look at our cases and develop a plan that levels the financial support our clients receive. Before, families on Match Grant and with a church cosponsor were "wealthy" compared to singles, couples without children, and small families who were not on any other support program. Now we can "even out" some of that money so all of our clients get the added assistance they need.

A case in point is a refugee woman we are resettling who is very mentally challenged. The services in town are very, very limited for her. She's capable of living by herself but her \$900 per

One of the new housing complexes Kentucky Refugee Ministries is using. Photo by Marianne Semones.



capita R&P grant was not enough to sustain her during the waiting period for SSI disability because she's a single. We were able to project forward the amount of time we could anticipate it was going to take for her to get SSI, prepay her rent using funds from the flex account, and keep her in a stable environment until it arrived. And it worked! Everything just went seamlessly. She now has the financial support that she needs. We wouldn't have been able to do that before. We would have been

really nervous about how to provide for her a safe environment over a long period of time.

With the increase in R&P, you can see the relief on the clients' faces. They have a little bit of money so they can make some decisions, which is so empowering to be able to make decisions about their family and their livelihood. At the close of their R&P period there is still a little bit of money left, which was not the case for many of the families.

Now our financial literacy advisor can meet with them, and take them to set up a checking account, and there's actually something to put in the checking account. ***They don't feel so dependent, and when you feel dependent you feel vulnerable. And they've been vulnerable for a long time.***

These families still have a long way to go. But having that initial assistance helps them feel empowered.

**Fabian Talamante,
Director, Amarillo Office,
Refugee Services of
Texas**



Before the R&P increase, it was very difficult because refugees only received \$450 per person. We have to buy household items, pay deposits, pay rent, and provide all that's required for the refugee, and it was very, very difficult and very stressful on our agency's staff.

Back in December we had a refugee couple who came who were expecting a baby. She bore the child, which had a cleft lip and heart problems. The father and mother were upset. They had to be taken to Dallas from Amarillo. It would have been nice



Bic and family in Amarillo, Texas. Photo courtesy Refugee Services of Texas.

to have been able to take some of the flex money that's available to us now and help them through this challenge in their life. And so, I wish the R&P increase had taken place a little sooner.

Now it's a great joy to say, "This is how much you get. We are able to help you better, give you quality service, household items, furniture, bedding" It's a great joy to have pride in resettling refugees now.

We had a family of seven that arrived and the father, Bic, was really concerned about how he was going to make it, especially because he had teenagers.

He came in that week that the R&P increase was announced, and when we told him if he'd have come just a couple of weeks earlier he would have gotten much less money he began to cry. He was so thankful that someone was really taking care of him.

**Sarah Ivory, Director, CWS
Immigration and Refugee
Office, Greensboro, North
Carolina**



Funding's always been an issue, but particularly in the last couple of years as the economy sank down. We were seeing anxiety and post-resettlement trauma as people were dealing with not knowing where their rent was coming from or how their utilities were going to be paid, and the staff was feeling this as well.

Refugees were coming into a situation where it was not realistic for them to succeed by the standards that are set for them. That was stressful, frustrating, and disappointing.

The R&P increase gives people a foundation they actually can work with. Now people are able to have a good start in our community. We can use the R&P funds for four, five, even six months' rent depending on the size of the family, giving them the opportunity to begin their resettlement period without the

constant financial worry that they had before.

The R&P increase also does things like make sure everyone has a prepaid cellphone when they first come so they know they can reach someone if they need to instead of wondering what they will do if no one comes to their house tomorrow. This eases stress for both clients and staff.

Greensboro is a smaller community that's proud of being a diverse and welcoming place. But it has felt overtaxed these last couple years. ***Now Greensboro is able to welcome refugees into its communities and neighborhoods, and not feel ashamed of the conditions they face due to financial limitation.***

This changes how I talk to our community and how they

communicate with us. People are able to do something they love doing without fear of financial obligations and responsibilities that they as volunteers are unprepared to take on.

It makes a huge difference for me to go out into a community that's concerned about what's going to happen when we have a cold winter again, if people have to get their heat cut off or get eviction notices. For the first time in at least three years I can say, "That's not going to happen this year, I promise you."

To feel confident in saying that makes a tremendous difference. It allows us to love our work more and through that, serve our clients better. Ultimately, the R&P per cap increase has made us able to be proud of our program again, and that's good for everyone.

Volunteers working with CWS clients in Durham, N.C. Photo by Joanna Schiestl.



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