



The Unmet Potential of Community Consultations in U.S. Refugee Resettlement

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Executive Summary

Humanitarian protection in the United States has moved into uncharted territory as new temporary and emergency humanitarian pathways layer complexity on top of a refugee resettlement system weakened by periods of crisis and dissolution. The U.S. government has created a range of population-specific temporary protection programs for groups such as evacuees from Afghanistan following the Taliban's seizure of power in 2021, Ukrainians fleeing Russia's 2022 invasion of their home country, and nationals of Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela due to political turmoil and/or economic crises in those countries. Between 2021 and mid-2023, approximately 500,000 individuals were granted entry into the United States through population-specific humanitarian pathways, joining the ranks of those admitted through the traditional refugee resettlement program and others standing under the increasingly crowded umbrella of humanitarian protection in the United States.

At the same time, formal refugee admissions have experienced huge swings—from a high of nearly 85,000 under the Obama administration in fiscal year (FY) 2016 to a low of 12,000 in FY 2020 under the Trump administration before rising sharply again under President Biden, though not yet meeting the 125,000 annual admissions target set for FY 2022 and again in FY 2023. Thus, when more than 200,000 Afghans and Ukrainians were admitted to the country through emergency initiatives in 2022 and 250,000 Cubans entered at the southern border through a wide variety of admissions circumstances, this came as a major shock to the system for the U.S. resettlement infrastructure that assists not only resettling refugees but certain other humanitarian migrant groups as well. In addition to those entering through prearranged pathways, recent years have seen an unprecedented increase in the use of parole authority to admit individuals arriving at the southwest border, some of whom go on to file asylum claims and enter the asylum system's enormous backlog of about 2 million cases. The impact of these large, fluctuating numbers and the rise of novel or previously underutilized pathways on U.S. communities cannot be overstated. Many local institutions and organizations have come under pressure to quickly increasing capacity in everything from public health clinics to schools to temporary housing to meet the challenges of historic numbers of humanitarian migrants arriving through different admissions streams, with different eligibility for benefits.

Coordination and communication among key actors in this shifting humanitarian protection space are now more important than ever.

Coordination and communication among key actors in this shifting humanitarian protection space are now more important than ever. The United States has formal consultation processes through which resettlement agencies and state refugee coordinators are required by the federal agencies tasked with resettlement and integration to brief receiving communities on anticipated refugee arrivals, gauge local capacity to receive them, and solicit input on how to best plan to for recent and prospective arrivals. These quarterly processes take place with the intent of facilitating the two-way flow of information between national actors responsible for decisions about refugees' admission and placement in communities across the country, and the state and local actors critical to supporting their reception and integration. Yet accounts from stakeholders involved in consultations tell a different story—one of narrowly missed opportunities for meaningful exchange.

This study examines the quarterly resettlement consultation process, as it is designed versus how it works in practice, within the context of a rapidly evolving humanitarian protection landscape. Drawing on insights shared in interviews and focus groups with federal leadership, state refugee coordinators, staff of national resettlement agencies and their local affiliates, and community stakeholders in fields ranging from health care to education, this research identifies key challenges and gaps in consultations as they currently operate. These include:

- ▶ Quarterly consultations, by design, focus specifically on traditional refugee resettlement and involve a mandated set of participants. As a result, consultations do not account for other humanitarian populations—even when these groups access the same services as refugees or otherwise affect a community’s resettlement capacity. They also tend not to involve nontraditional actors, such as representatives of community sponsorship initiatives or philanthropies. This structure makes it difficult to get a comprehensive picture of local resources and bandwidth, and can preclude discussion of pressing challenges and divergent opinions.
- ▶ Consultations are required to cover an extensive set of topics, including demographic data on arrivals, barriers to resettlement, and caseload projections. Yet prescriptive agendas, along with the limited time and resources available to cover this mandatory information, can limit opportunities for meaningful, two-way communication between consultation conveners and community stakeholders.
- ▶ Information shared by local stakeholders or government actors about the impacts other humanitarian and immigrant populations have on local systems does not always get shared during consultations, nor is it always taken into account in decisions about what a community’s capacity is and the process of placing admitted refugees in U.S. communities. In addition to being a missed opportunity to improve national decision-making, this disconnect can erode consultation participants’ buy-in to the process and perceptions of its value.
- ▶ Relationship- and capacity-building are just as important as the timely transmission of information. Yet despite the urgent need for collective problem-solving, quarterly consultations’ rigid requirements mean that real collaboration among the stakeholders charged with scaling up resettlement and preparing for other humanitarian arrivals tends to take place outside of this formal structure.

Based on these findings, the study lays out a set of recommendations for federal, state, and local resettlement actors and key community stakeholders seeking to improve the consultation process as well as coordination within U.S. humanitarian pathways operations more broadly. These include:

- 1 Data and information sharing during consultations should be expanded to include information and metrics on additional humanitarian populations.** Because local systems interact with many newcomer groups—and refugees may represent a small share of their service population—such information is critical to better understanding local capacities. Representatives of state and local governments should consider sharing relevant non-personally identifying information about other newcomer populations with state refugee coordinators during or in advance of consultations. For their part, state refugee coordinators should consider providing information on other immigrant populations eligible for Office of Refugee Resettlement services (such as arrival trends, geographic

distribution, characteristics, and special needs), which is available to them via the Refugee Arrivals Data System online platform.

- 2 **Consultations should be co-convened by resettlement agencies and state refugee coordinators, when suitable to the context, and in collaboration with local leadership.** The local affiliates of resettlement agencies often take the lead on quarterly consultations, while state refugee coordinators' role varies from state to state. Having these two entities share convening responsibilities—whether jointly organizing sessions or alternating from one session to the next—would help more evenly share the administrative burden. In addition, community stakeholders could take part in the agenda-setting and convening process (e.g., requesting a presentation from local emergency services) to help tailor sessions to the locality and elevate community concerns.
- 3 **Consultation should be supported by dedicated resources and staffing.** The Office of Refugee Resettlement and the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration—the federal entities that mandate and set out guidelines for the quarterly consultation process—should support these consultations through dedicated set-aside funding for staff positions charged with organizing these sessions and conducting related outreach. These federal actors could also distribute best practices collected from local resettlement agencies and state refugee coordinators through their respective reporting requirements.
- 4 **Federal agencies involved in resettlement should facilitate opportunities for ongoing communication and relationship-building beyond quarterly consultations.** Because strong working relationships require more regular, intensive forms of communication than occur within consultations, supporting other forms of collaboration is essential to effective resettlement operations. As part of this effort, the Office of Refugee Resettlement should maintain its interagency initiatives that conduct fact-finding at the border and in communities affected by high humanitarian arrival numbers. The agency, alongside the State Department, should hold biweekly meetings with State Coordinators of Refugee Resettlement (the national association of state refugee coordinators) and national resettlement agencies to address various issues in resettlement and other humanitarian pathways.
- 5 **High-level representation from local and state governments should be included in consultation activities.** This should include representatives of governors, mayors, and county executive offices that focus on immigration and/or immigrant integration concerns as well as department leads whose portfolios include a significant focus on services for immigrants and their family members. In states and localities where these individuals do attend consultations, the resettlement network's increased access to government representation improves communication with leadership and advances opportunities to advocate for resettlement in the state.
- 6 **Pathways should be created for ongoing communication between established and newer resettlement actors, including private sponsors.** The ramifications of insufficient communication have been vividly highlighted in cases where relationships between humanitarian parolees and their sponsors have broken down and local resettlement agencies have become responsible for assisting newcomers—at times having not been aware that there were sponsored parolees in their area. State

refugee coordinators and resettlement agencies should create communication channels between sponsors and resettlement stakeholders to ensure sponsors regularly receive accurate and up-to-date, locally relevant information on resettlement (e.g., safety net program eligibility nuances, the availability of ethnic/cultural groups or legal services in the area). In addition, the Office of Refugee Resettlement; Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration; and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services should ensure that, to the extent possible, state refugee coordinators and local resettlement agencies are informed about the presence of sponsorship groups in their communities and receive information about the profiles of arriving sponsored refugees and parolees. Lastly, the Community Sponsorship Hub and other national organizations responsible for onboarding private individuals who volunteer to become sponsors should ensure that sponsors receive accurate and state/locality-specific information about services available to the newcomers they will support and contact points in their communities that can troubleshoot complex case needs or barriers to service access.

As the patchwork of local, state, and federal actors that form the U.S. refugee resettlement network continues to grow and local communities face new challenges amid the expansion of humanitarian pathways, the need for effective communication and coordination has never been greater. Like other aspects of the resettlement system, formal consultation processes are coming to a crossroads

at which it must be decided whether they will embrace new realities or, by remaining as they are, wane in relevance. Policymakers and practitioners have an opportunity to make changes now that will ensure the resettlement consultation process is more inclusive, collaborative, and grounded in the ways in which humanitarian protection is evolving, and ultimately more effective in achieving its larger purposes.

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1 Introduction

Refugee resettlement in the United States has seen tremendous change in recent years, from its near collapse under the Trump administration¹ to a period of accelerated reconstruction and significant reshaping of the broader humanitarian protection regime under the Biden administration. For fiscal year (FY) 2022, President Joe Biden raised the annual refugee resettlement ceiling to 125,000, up from a historic low of 18,000 for FY 2020 under the prior administration.² At the same time, new pathways have been established through which humanitarian migrants can come to the country. In 2021, Biden signed an executive order creating a new refugee sponsorship program (which became operational in January 2023), and in 2021 and 2022, the United States launched two emergency initiatives that admitted at least 200,000

¹ The Trump administration set progressively lower annual refugee admission ceilings—50,000 in fiscal year (FY) 2017, 45,000 in FY 2018, 30,000 in FY 2019, and 18,000 in FY 2020—and twice admitted the fewest refugees of any year since the modern U.S. refugee resettlement program began in 1980: 22,533 in FY 2018 and then 11,814 in FY 2020. In FY 2021, the year that straddled the Trump and Biden administrations, only 11,411 refugees were admitted, due in part to the impact of the pandemic on resettlement operations. See Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub, “U.S. Annual Refugee Resettlement Ceilings and Number of Refugees Admitted, 1980-Present,” accessed October 18, 2023.

² MPI Data Hub, “U.S. Annual Refugee Resettlement Ceilings and Number of Refugees Admitted.”

Afghans and Ukrainians to the country on humanitarian parole, Operation Allies Welcome (OAW) and Uniting for Ukraine (U4U).³

These policy shifts have increased both the volume and the complexity of receiving and supporting new arrivals, as people admitted via different humanitarian streams have different eligibility for state and federal benefits and services. In addition, states and localities receive advance notice for arrivals through some but not all streams. The refugee resettlement network in the United States, which supports refugees and other eligible populations, is a patchwork of local, state, and federal partners that work together to provide integration services, such as support with employment and education, housing, language acquisition, health care, and cash assistance. Though a variety of humanitarian populations are technically eligible for resettlement services (see Box 2), only refugees and most Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders are immediately connected to resettlement services through a federal mechanism (the traditional Reception and Placement program). The rapidly changing protection landscape has created significant new coordination and consultation needs within this diverse set of governmental, nongovernmental, and community actors.

The federal government requires resettlement agencies to formally consult with local actors that are key to the success of the resettlement enterprise regarding the admission and reception of refugees; however, this typically only applies to the resettlement of refugees and SIV holders resettled through a resettlement agency. These quarterly consultations are an important tool for bringing together local systems, such as schools and health clinics, to plan and prepare for refugee arrivals. Many local resettlement actors also engage in additional formal and informal consultation efforts that can stretch well beyond what is federally mandated in order to more fully address the needs of receiving communities and newcomers coming from outside of the traditional refugee resettlement system.

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With the humanitarian protection landscape undergoing significant changes not only in the United States but in many parts of the world, researchers from the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) and MPI Europe undertook a project in 2022 to examine consultation and coordination processes in various refugee-receiving countries. One report emerging from this research, published earlier this year, compares different approaches to consultation and coordination in Europe and the Americas. The other—this report—focuses on consultation as it takes place in the United States, drawing on stakeholder interviews and focus groups (see Box 1) as well as existing literature. The United States is a particularly unique case study given its history as a global leader in resettlement and because of the federal government’s unique role in consultation, mandating the process through federal statute and also specifying which local partners should be consulted and how, in addition to consultations between the president and Congress.

³ Muzaffar Chishti and Jessica Bolter, “Welcoming Afghans and Ukrainians to the United States: A Case in Similarities and Contrasts,” *Migration Information Source*, July 13, 2022; Muzaffar Chishti and Kathleen Bush-Joseph, “In the Twilight Zone: Record Number of U.S. Immigrants Are in Limbo Statuses,” *Migration Information Source*, August 2, 2023.

The topic of consultation has become increasingly salient as pressures on the resettlement network build, requiring a sophisticated level of communication, coordination, and problem-solving among the various actors tasked with managing the diverse needs of humanitarian migrants. This process has also received increased attention from key federal agencies overseeing resettlement and integration, including the Office of Refugee Resettlement and the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. These federal partners issued a call in 2023 to improve consultation procedures in collaboration with state refugee coordinators and national resettlement agencies, and the Office of Refugee Resettlement has since released a notice of its intention to change its state plan language, suggesting a shift in consultation roles and responsibilities.⁴ Against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving resettlement landscape, this report explores the U.S. local refugee resettlement consultation process, identifying both longstanding and burgeoning challenges and potential solutions.

BOX 1 About This Study

In 2022, Migration Policy Institute researchers conducted 36 interviews and 4 focus groups, each with approximately four to ten participants. These interviews and focus groups provided unique perspectives on consultations in six localities with varied resettlement experience (Dallas, TX; Greensboro, NC; Los Angeles, CA; Sacramento, CA; San Diego, CA; and Troy, MI); seven states highly affected by large numbers of immigrant arrivals (California, Colorado, Kentucky, New York, North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin); and the national landscape more broadly. The participants represented a broad range of organizations and fields, including seven state refugee coordinators, eight national resettlement agencies, federal partners, and local community stakeholders. Community stakeholders included individuals from the health-care, education, and local resettlement sectors and with varying levels of involvement or leadership in the quarterly consultation process.

This report first provides an overview of the U.S. refugee resettlement program and the consultation process as it is statutorily defined. It then explores the goals and design of consultations, how the process plays out in practice, and its perceived role in decision-making regarding the admission and disbursement of refugee arrivals. The report also analyzes the implications of consultation within the context of recent resettlement and immigration policy changes, including during humanitarian emergencies and in relation to newly created humanitarian pathways. The report concludes with promising practices and recommendations for federal partners, state and local governments, state refugee coordinators, and resettlement agencies.

2 U.S. Resettlement: A Patchwork of Actors and Interests

The refugee resettlement network in the United States is a patchwork of local, state, and federal partners that work together to provide integration services such as employment and education programs, housing assistance, language acquisition support, health care, and cash assistance. Though the United States has a longer history of assisting refugees during times of global conflict, this patchwork system was formally established after the United States passed the *Refugee Act of 1980* in response to the emergency resettlement and diaspora of individuals fleeing conflict and communist regimes in Eastern Europe and

⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families, “Proposed Information Collection Activity; State Plan for Grants to States for Refugee Resettlement (Office of Management and Budget #0970-0351),” *Federal Register* 88, no. 211 (November 2, 2023): 75289–75290.

Vietnam (see Box 2). This legislation established formal procedures, roles, and responsibilities for admitting and providing benefits and services to refugees.⁵

BOX 2

Refugees and Other Humanitarian Populations in the United States

In the United States, the *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952* defines a refugee as a person who is outside of their country or origin and is unable or unwilling to return because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Following the United States' expanded role in the emergency resettlement of individuals fleeing communist regimes in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia, Congress passed the *Refugee Act of 1980*. The *Refugee Act* formalized the design of the modern U.S. refugee resettlement system.

Per the *Refugee Act* and the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996*, refugees and other specific humanitarian groups qualify for various mainstream public benefits as well as services funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). These other humanitarian groups, not all of which are formally covered by resettlement consultations, include:

- ▶ **Asylees**, who meet the same definition of persecution as refugees but apply for and are granted protection when already present in the United States or seeking admission at a port of entry;
- ▶ **Humanitarian parolees**, who are otherwise inadmissible noncitizens admitted into the United States for a temporary period of time for a humanitarian reason or public benefit;
- ▶ **Victims of trafficking** permitted to remain in the United States for a certain period of time on a T visa;
- ▶ **Cuban and Haitian entrants**, who are Cuban or Haitian nationals paroled into the United States or otherwise admitted to the country and not subject to a final removal order; and
- ▶ **Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders**, a group comprised of Afghan and Iraqi nationals granted status and admission into the United States due to their service to the U.S. government in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Sources: *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952*, Public Law 82-414, Sect. 101 (a)(42); ORR, "Status and Documentation Requirements for the ORR Refugee Resettlement Program," updated November 29, 2022; Department of Homeland Security (DHS), "Refugees and Asylees," updated October 7, 2022; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), "Humanitarian or Significant Public Benefit Parole for Individuals Outside the United States," updated October 23, 2023; USCIS, "Victims of Human Trafficking: T Nonimmigrant Status," updated August 21, 2023; USCIS, "Cuban Haitian Entrant Program (CHEP)," updated April 3, 2018; ORR, "Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Holders from Iraq and Afghanistan," updated August 18, 2021; *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996*, Public Law 104-193, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 110 (1996): Sect. 601-646.

⁵ Most prominently, the Refugee Act cements the federal government's authority in the assistance of refugees, regularizes admissions rates, creates standards for integration-related services, and requires certain consultation practices with key partners. *Refugee Act of 1980*, Public Law 96-212, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 94 (1980): 102.

The United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) is structured across several governmental agencies and contracted nongovernmental partners.⁶ Each year, the president sets an annual refugee admissions ceiling, under guidance from the State Department and other Cabinet-level leaders and in consultation with Congress. Refugees referred by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or certain other authorities to the USRAP for resettlement must first be screened and processed by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), an agency within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), at an overseas Resettlement Support Center funded by the Department of State.⁷ USCIS then issues legal documents to refugees selected for resettlement, and the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) arranges their travel to the United States.

Within the United States, PRM contracts ten national voluntary agencies (VOLAGs) to provide Reception and Placement (R&P) services to refugees within the first 90 days after their arrival in the country (known as the R&P period). Each VOLAG has a network of offices, known as local resettlement agencies (LRAs), spread throughout the country. Arriving refugees are sent to receiving communities after representatives from all ten VOLAGs review biodemographic data, whether refugees have any existing connections in the United States and where those are, and which locality is best equipped to meet any specific needs (such as health conditions).⁸ The resettlement agencies must provide housing and living essentials, airport transportation upon arrival, school and public benefits enrollment support, and assistance with finding employment and accessing health services.⁹

Though PRM and its grantees oversee refugees' initial reception and placement, it is the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that is responsible for supporting their long-term integration. ORR does this through various programs such as Refugee Cash and Medical Assistance (CMA)¹⁰ and Refugee Support Services (RSS),¹¹ each with different eligibility requirements and metrics for successful service delivery by local actors. Refugees and other ORR-eligible populations (see Box 2) may also benefit from specialized ORR-funded services provided by partner organizations for specific populations such as youth, seniors, or exceptionally vulnerable communities.¹² (ORR also operates the country's Unaccompanied Children Program.) While PRM and ORR play important roles in the administration and management of the USRAP, it is the actions of the resettlement network at large and the perseverance of the populations served that are essential to its success.

6 U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), "The United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) Consultation and Worldwide Processing Priorities," updated August 6, 2021.

7 USCIS, "Refugee Processing and Security Screening," updated June 3, 2020.

8 Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), "Resettlement Agencies," updated February 23, 2023.

9 U.S. Department of State, "Reception and Placement," accessed December 11, 2022.

10 Refugee Cash and Medical Assistance (CMA) provides financial assistance to refugees deemed ineligible for federal or state-funded mainstream benefit programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Medicaid to assist with covering the costs of basic needs and/or health care. See ORR, "Cash and Medical Assistance," updated November 23, 2022.

11 Refugee Support Services is a stream of ORR funding designated to support further integration and economic independence for refugees up to five years after arrival in the United States. See ORR, "Refugee Support Services," accessed December 12, 2022.

12 ORR, "Youth Mentoring," updated June 29, 2020; ORR, "Preferred Communities," updated December 13, 2022; ORR, "Services to Older Refugees," accessed November 21, 2023.

State government officials are a particularly critical component of the network. Each state has a state refugee coordinator (SRC) and state refugee health coordinator (SRHC) situated within the state government or a designated replacement organization (if the state has opted out of the USRAP).¹³ These coordinators oversee the administration of statewide resettlement operations in collaboration with LRAs, with SRHCs specifically focused on activities related to health care (e.g., mandatory health screenings, vaccination campaigns, and improving refugees' access to local health-care systems). Although SRCs coordinate with both PRM and ORR, they primarily report to and oversee funding from ORR. State and local partners within the resettlement network might include LRAs, ethnic community-based organizations, public health and welfare agencies, schools, and other key stakeholders involved in reception and integration.

While this patchwork structure has the potential to strengthen the program, it can also foster dysfunction when key actors do not work together effectively.

This multistakeholder approach to resettlement brings together and aims to foster collaboration among actors with different areas of expertise, a model that avoids placing the pressure of unilateral responsibility on any one entity. But while this patchwork structure has the potential to strengthen the program, it can also foster dysfunction when key actors do not work together effectively.

3 What Is Consultation and Why Does It Matter?

Given the numerous partners engaged in refugee resettlement, ensuring communication at every stage of the process is an essential but complex endeavor that requires both formal and informal elements. Unlike in other countries that resettle refugees, the U.S. federal government mandates that this communication take place in certain ways. Specifically, federal law requires the executive branch to consult with Congress on a proposed maximum number of refugee admissions for each fiscal year, while federal guidance from ORR and PRM instructs SRCs and resettlement agencies, respectively, to consult with local communities and other key stakeholders on their capacities to receive and support the integration of admitted refugees.

According to federal regulation, the primary purpose of consultation is to “plan and coordinate the appropriate placement of refugee arrivals.”¹⁴ Beyond what exists in statute, formal consultations can serve a variety of goals, and different stakeholders may or may not find them valuable for different reasons. These goals might include sharing information, troubleshooting concerns, and developing a collective baseline understanding of a community’s capacity. While the consultation process can be a space for community stakeholders to constructively discuss local capacity, it is not a process through which communities provide approval to receive a certain number of projected arrivals. The federal government makes the final decision on how many refugees are admitted and where they are resettled.

¹³ A replacement designee is an entity outside of state government, usually a local affiliate of a national voluntary agency (VOLAG), that administers the refugee resettlement program should the state government opt out. See ORR, “Replacement Designees” (Policy Letter 18-03, June 26, 2018).

¹⁴ *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952*, Public Law 82–414, Sect. 412 (a)(1)(C)(ii).

The structure of the quarterly consultation process underwent notable changes following a 2010 report to the Committee on Foreign Relations and 2012 report by the Government Accountability Office.¹⁵ Both reports found that few resettlement agencies were consulting with local stakeholders and that communities were struggling to plan for arrivals without consistent consultations. Each study made recommendations to the State Department on improving the formal consultation process, suggesting guidance on how VOLAGS and their affiliates should consult communities in advance of placement decisions and the information that should be required to be shared in the sessions. PRM responded by creating more detailed guidance on how to conduct consultations, which was then elaborated on in a cooperative agreement signed by the VOLAGs (see Table 1 for details).

The guidance specifies the following:¹⁶

- ▶ Consultations must occur quarterly.
- ▶ At minimum, the SRC and SRHC; city or county government; and city or county public health, welfare, social services, public safety, and public education offices must be represented.
- ▶ Consultations must include information on arrivals numbers and projections, the demographic characteristics of arriving refugees, a discussion of state and local stakeholders' ability to serve projected arrivals, a discussion of integration support, and any issues that might prevent effective resettlement operations.

Compliance with these requirements is monitored through internal and external federal reporting mechanisms. The cooperative agreement (the grant contract between PRM and VOLAGs) requires the VOLAGs to submit annual and quarterly program reports to PRM verifying that their affiliates are in compliance with consultation requirements.¹⁷ These reports feature a summary of consultations, including the "percentage of affiliates in full compliance with all requirements for participation and discussion topics at quarterly consultations (QCs), any consultation best practices, and discussion of any issues that prevent adequate resettlement in a given community or result in changes in the recipient's placement plans."¹⁸ To meet federal reporting requirements, the VOLAGs sometimes introduce internal reporting mechanisms to ensure that the cooperative agreement's requirements are being met across their affiliate network.¹⁹

15 Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, *Abandoned Upon Arrival: Implications for Refugees and Local Communities Burdened by a U.S. Resettlement System that is Not Working* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2010); Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Refugee Resettlement: Greater Consultation with Community Stakeholders Could Strengthen Program* (Washington, DC: GAO, 2012).

16 U.S. Department of State, "2021 Cooperative Agreement" (unpublished document shared with MPI researchers, updated December 2020), Sect. 12.

17 U.S. Department of State, "2021 Cooperative Agreement."

18 U.S. Department of State, "2021 Cooperative Agreement," Sect. 12.

19 Author interview with director of initial resettlement at a national resettlement agency, July 18, 2022; author interview with director of resettlement services at a national resettlement agency, July 11, 2022; author interview with former community engagement and sponsorship manager at a national resettlement agency, August 25, 2022; author interview with senior director of resettlement and integration at a national resettlement agency, August 11, 2022; author interview with senior program manager at a national resettlement agency, August 31, 2022.

ORR, very much like PRM, requires SRCs to consult with state and local stakeholders as an instrumental component of their position. Though the guidance is extraordinarily similar, ORR guidance and language in the *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952* specify the following:²⁰

- ▶ Consultations must occur quarterly.
- ▶ At minimum, the SRHC, resettlement agencies, and state and local governments must be represented. Convenings shall include outreach and invitations to local stakeholders (such as members of city or county public health, social services, public safety, and public education offices).

SRCs must report to ORR on their consultation compliance as part of the ORR-6, a quarterly performance report. These reports must include the number of consultations held during the reporting period, including dates and locations; a general description of the stakeholders in attendance; and a summary of the main issues discussed, such as arrival patterns, local capacity, and barriers to resettlement.

Table 1 presents an overview of the key actors and requirements of these primary formal consultation processes. Given the similarity between the two processes, LRAs and SRCs typically participate in each other's consultations, but not always. For the average stakeholder, it can be challenging to discern whether the two types of community consultation meetings are being held in parallel with representation from both SRCs and LRAs or whether meetings are being held through joint facilitation (see Section 5.A for more). In addition to what is prescribed by U.S. law, informal, context-specific consultation practices also exist, as will be described in Section 4.

The inner workings of the consultation process between the president and Congress are not typically made public. The conclusions reached (such as the proposed admissions ceiling) are published in the State Department's annual *Report to Congress on Proposed Refugee Admissions*, but this report typically provides little insight into how certain conclusions were drawn.²¹ Therefore, this report largely focuses on the quarterly consultation process currently required of SRCs and VOLAGs.

20 ORR, "ORR-6 Performance Report Instructions—Schedule A—Section B: Quarterly Consultations" (guidance document, OMB Control No. 0970-0036, expires December 31, 2025); ORR, "State Plan Template for Grants to States and Replacement Designees for Refugee Resettlement" (guidance document, OMB Control No. 0970-0351, expires June 30, 2024).

21 U.S. Department of State, *Report to Congress on Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2023* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2022).

TABLE 1
Formal Consultation Processes in the U.S. Refugee Resettlement System

Consultation Process	Leading Actors	Requirements	Legal Basis
<p>Determining Refugee Admissions: The executive branch must consult with Congress on refugee admissions before making its final determination on the annual refugee admissions ceiling.</p>	<p>The president and Cabinet-level leaders, typically the secretary of state; judiciary committees of the Senate and the House of Representatives</p>	<p>Timeline: Annual, before the start of a new fiscal year</p> <p>Content: Discussion must include topics such as analysis of the global refugee situation, origin-country conditions, and humanitarian concerns; proposed refugee admissions by world region; projected resettlement costs; the extent of resettlement in other countries; and how resettlement affects U.S. communities and foreign policy interests.</p> <p>Participation: Each fiscal year, the Department of State consults with the national voluntary agencies (VOLAGs) to develop a report for Congress that proposes annual admissions numbers, justifications, and other priorities.</p>	<p><i>Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952</i></p>
<p>Community Consultations: The State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) requires consultation between the VOLAGs and community stakeholders on current and future resettlement operations.</p>	<p>PRM; VOLAGs and their local affiliates; community stakeholders</p>	<p>Timeline: Quarterly</p> <p>Content: VOLAGs must provide year-to-date information on arrivals and projected arrivals, including nationality, ethnicity, family size, education level, language proficiencies, and health concerns. They must also (co-)facilitate discussion of the community’s capacity to serve current and projected caseloads, community strategies to support integration, and factors that may limit resettlement.</p> <p>Participation: The VOLAGs must invite: state refugee coordinator; state refugee health coordinator; representatives of local governments and local offices of health, education, welfare, and public safety; and other refugee-serving community-based organizations.</p>	<p>State Department’s 2021 cooperative agreement with the VOLAGs; State Department’s FY 2023 Notice of Funding Opportunity for Reception and Placement Program</p>
<p>Community Consultations: The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) requires state refugee coordinators to consult with local resettlement agencies and other community stakeholders on current and projected refugee arrivals.</p>	<p>ORR; state refugee coordinators; VOLAGs and their local affiliates; community stakeholders</p>	<p>Timeline: Quarterly</p> <p>Content: The state refugee coordinator (co-) facilitates discussion about planning for recent and projected arrivals, including trends and barriers to resettlement.</p> <p>Participation: State resettlement coordinators are required to consult with local resettlement agencies, the state refugee health coordinator, local community service agencies, state and local governments, and other refugee-serving agencies.</p>	<p><i>Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952</i>; ORR’s performance report instructions and state plan guidance</p>

Sources: *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952*, Public Law 82–414, Sect. 207(a)(1), (d)(1) and (e), Sect. 412 (a)(2)(A-B); U.S. Department of State, “2021 Cooperative Agreement” (unpublished document shared with MPI researchers, updated December 2020), Sect. 3.B.1 and Sect. 15.II.E; ORR, “ORR-6 Performance Report Instructions—Schedule A—Section B: Quarterly Consultations” (guidance document, OMB Control No. 0970-0036, expires December 31, 2025); ORR, “State Plan Template for Grants to States and Replacement Designees for Refugee Resettlement” (guidance document, OMB Control No. 0970-0351, expires June 30, 2024); U.S. Department of State, “FY 2023 Notice of Funding Opportunity for Reception and Placement Program” (funding announcement, April 14, 2022).

Consultation in a Rapidly Shifting and More Crowded Landscape

Determining the number of refugees to be admitted into the United States each year has become a politically divisive topic. The refugee resettlement program historically received overwhelmingly bipartisan support, and it has been a point of national pride that the United States has long been a global leader in this space (historically providing two-thirds of the world's resettlement places each year).²² Recently, this consensus has begun to erode, as immigration has become a more politically divisive issue, with the gap widening between those who oppose *any* increases in immigration levels and those in favor of expanding humanitarian protection avenues. Refugee admissions have also been at the center of political battles in new ways, with more than ten state governments opting out of the program entirely as of 2023, and Congress struggling to come to an agreement on key resettlement legislation such as the *Afghan Adjustment Act*.²³ The Trump administration's significant cuts to refugee admissions also forced resettlement agencies to dramatically reduce their staffing and close local offices, decimating the local infrastructure critical to supporting refugees after arrival.²⁴ As resettlement staff moved on to find other work and relationships eroded in the absence of active, consistent arrivals, years of capacity-building under prior administrations were wiped away.

Since President Biden assumed office in 2021, a primary focus has been on rebuilding the program. This has been a time-consuming process requiring not just political will but also a tremendous amount of work on the ground, including hiring and training thousands of staff and reengaging community networks. In Biden's first two years in office, the USRAP continued to admit relatively small numbers of refugees, with fewer than 26,000 in FY 2022, despite much higher admissions ceilings and statements reaffirming the United States' commitment to this process.²⁵ Perhaps unsurprisingly, advocates of the program have criticized the Biden administration for not acting more swiftly to restore annual admissions and rebuild the resettlement infrastructure.²⁶

The work of restoring resettlement capacity has been challenged by the rapid expansion of humanitarian arrivals to the United States via other pathways.

The work of restoring resettlement capacity has been challenged by the rapid expansion of humanitarian arrivals to the United States via other pathways. In August 2021, U.S. forces completed their withdrawal from Afghanistan, leading to the collapse of the Afghan government and Kabul's fall to Taliban forces. The United States and a number of other countries launched a massive airlift of at-risk Afghans, including individuals who had worked for U.S. and allied governments, from Kabul airport. Many of those individuals

22 Susan F. Martin and Elizabeth Ferris, "Leading by Example: US Refugee Policy at Home and Abroad," Wilson Center, July 27, 2023; Randy Capps et al., *The Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees: Successes and Challenges* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2015).

23 ORR, "Replacement Designee Selections for Fiscal Year 2022" (Dear Colleague Letter 22-02, October 5, 2021); Rebecca Beitsch, "Afghan Refugees Are Stuck in US Limbo as Congress Fails to Move Legislation," The Hill, August 30, 2023.

24 Anita Snow and Julie Watson, "Under Trump, US No Longer Leads World on Refugee Protections," AP News, October 26, 2020; Bobby Allyn, "Trump Administration Drastically Cuts Number of Refugees Allowed to Enter the U.S.," NPR, September 26, 2019.

25 MPI Data Hub, "U.S. Annual Refugee Resettlement Ceilings and Number of Refugees Admitted"; Bill Frelick, "Biden Administration Falls Far Short of US Refugee Admissions Cap," Human Rights Watch, October 7, 2021; Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "White House Weighs Another Reduction in Refugees Admitted to U.S.," *The New York Times*, August 1, 2018; Kristina Cooke and Mica Rosenberg, "Trump Plans to Slash U.S. Refugee Admissions to New Low," Reuters, October 1, 2020.

26 Priscilla Alvarez et al., "Biden Resists Raising Refugee Cap over Political Optics, Sources Say," CNN, April 15, 2021; Refugee Council USA, "Hundreds of Advocates Call on Congress to Rebuild Refugee Resettlement" (press release, May 11, 2022).

bound for the United States were admitted directly to the country, while others were temporarily taken to U.S. military bases abroad for processing. Ultimately, 75,898 Afghan evacuees were paroled into the United States between July 30, 2021 and June 30, 2022 as part of Operation Allies Welcome (OAW).²⁷ Afghans at risk continue to be admitted to the United States under the refugee resettlement program and on Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs).

The outbreak of war in Ukraine followed roughly a half a year later, after Russian forces invaded the country in February 2022. Approximately 1 million people fled Ukraine within the first week of the war,²⁸ and as of September 2023, 6 million Ukrainians had been recorded as refugees.²⁹ In response, the Biden administration launched Uniting for Ukraine (U4U), which created a pathway for displaced Ukrainians to enter the United States under humanitarian parole for a period of two years. U4U beneficiaries must have a financial sponsor or “supporter” in the United States who provides evidence they are able to financially support the beneficiary for up to two years. Sponsors are also encouraged to support beneficiaries in securing housing, enrolling for public benefits and social services, and accessing health care and schooling, though sponsors and U4U beneficiaries are not required by law to live in the same location, and there is no legal means to hold sponsors liable for providing any financial or other supports to those they sponsor.³⁰ By January 2023, nearly 200,000 people had applied to serve as supporters,³¹ and as of July 2023, more than 140,000 Ukrainians had arrived in the United States.³²

With the U4U program viewed as highly successful in achieving its primary goal—admitting large numbers of displaced people in need of protection in a relatively short period of time—the Biden administration subsequently created humanitarian parole pathways for certain other populations. In October 2022, the administration created a parole pathway for Venezuelan nationals with financial supporters in the United States, and in January 2023, a similar sponsorship-based parole program was launched for nationals of Cuba, Haiti, and Nicaragua. Together, the parole processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (CHNV) are positioned to authorize 360,000 individuals in one year (30,000 per month) for admission to the United States—a figure nearly triple the FY 2023 refugee admissions ceiling of 125,000.³³ As of the end of September 2023, more than 240,000 CHNV parolees had been admitted to the country.³⁴

The use of parole to support novel, population-specific humanitarian pathways has occurred in parallel with a rapid expansion of parole being offered to individuals arriving at the U.S. border without prior authorization to enter as a border management strategy, allowing them into the United States while they await further immigration processing. The number of Cuban entrants soared to more than 250,000 in FY

27 Department of Homeland Security (DHS), *Department of Homeland Security Operation Allies Welcome Afghan Parolee and Benefits Report* (Washington, DC: DHS, 2022).

28 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “News Comment: 1 Million Refugees Have Fled Ukraine in a Week” (press release, March 3, 2022).

29 UNHCR, “Ukraine Refugee Situation,” Operational Data Portal, updated September 12, 2023.

30 USCIS, “Uniting for Ukraine,” updated September 20, 2023.

31 International Rescue Committee, “As President Biden Visits Poland, the IRC Urges the US to Maintain Groundbreaking Support for Ukrainian Refugees” (press release, February 15, 2023).

32 Ashley Murray, “Ukrainians by the Thousands Arrive in States, but with a Time Limit,” *New Jersey Monitor*, January 20, 2023; Chishti and Bush-Joseph, “In the Twilight Zone.”

33 USCIS, “Processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans,” updated September 20, 2023; MPI Data Hub, “U.S. Annual Refugee Resettlement Ceilings and Number of Refugees Admitted.”

34 U.S. Customs and Border Protection, “CBP Releases September 2023 Monthly Update” (news release, October 21, 2023).

2022,³⁵ unaccompanied children released into U.S. communities totaled 235,000 in FY 2021 and FY 2022 combined,³⁶ and about 2 million asylum cases were awaiting adjudication as of September 2023.³⁷

Individuals admitted under the OAW, U4U, and CHNV programs and paroled at the U.S. border have vastly different eligibility for public benefits and ORR-funded services. Both Afghan and Ukrainian humanitarian parolees are eligible for ORR-funded benefits and services, and Afghans admitted under OAW were also eligible for R&P services, or an equivalent set of services, from LRAs.³⁸ For individuals paroled through the CHNV program, their fiscal sponsor or “supporter” is expected to provide core integration services, such as assisting with children’s school enrollment or identifying ways to meet medical needs.³⁹ Cuban entrants and unaccompanied children are eligible for ORR-funded and mainstream benefits and services, while asylum seekers will only qualify for these benefits if they receive asylum.⁴⁰

Regardless of their eligibility for refugee and asylee benefits, all of these humanitarian populations will likely need access, at some stage, to mainstream public services such as local public education systems, including English language services; welfare case managers; public health services; and affordable housing complexes that are also utilized by formally resettled populations. This rapid growth in humanitarian admissions has brought unprecedented diversity of admissions pathways, needs, and eligibility standards to these local systems, putting service providers and agencies already working with refugee resettlement partners under incredible strain.

To address these pressures, the federal government has been experimenting with new measures to complement the capacity of resettlement agencies during the R&P process, including by drawing on the resources of private groups and volunteers to support refugees during the initial R&P period alongside or instead of LRAs. During OAW, PRM piloted a wide range of modalities for drawing on the capacity of volunteer groups to support reception. These included:

- ▶ **Community Partner Placement Program.** This model assigned Afghans arriving via OAW to a national resettlement agency, rather than a local affiliate. The national agencies then worked with and provided remote support to community groups working with Afghan evacuees located outside the resettlement agency’s normal geographic operational radius (100 miles).

35 Speech by Robin Dunn Marcos, Director, ORR, at the Reimagining Refugee Resettlement Switchboard Research Symposium, Phoenix, AZ, August 22, 2023.

36 Unaccompanied children are unauthorized immigrant children with no accompanying parent or guardian at the time of federal detection. Unaccompanied children can be released from detention to vetted sponsors while they await their immigration proceedings, and some receive a host of post-release integration services facilitated by ORR (if referred). See ORR, “Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors by State,” updated February 1, 2023.

37 The asylum backlog comprises affirmative cases launched from the U.S. interior and being processed by USCIS as well as defensive cases launched at a port of entry and/or during immigration court removal proceedings. Comments made during USCIS Asylum Quarterly Engagement, FY 2023 Quarter 4, Washington, DC, September 19, 2023; Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) Immigration, “Immigration Court Asylum Backlog,” accessed October 4, 2023.

38 ORR, “Eligibility for Refugee Resettlement Program Benefits and Services: Parolees from Afghanistan or Ukraine” (Dear Colleague Letter 24-01, October 3, 2023); Mark Greenberg, Celia Reynolds, and Essey Workie, “Different Statuses, Different Benefits: Determining Federal Assistance for Afghan Evacuees” (commentary, MPI, Washington, DC, September 2021).

39 USCIS, “Processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans.”

40 ORR, “Unaccompanied Children (UC) Program” (fact sheet, November 3, 2023); ORR, “Status and Documentation Requirements for the ORR Refugee Resettlement Program,” updated November 29, 2022; TRAC, “A Sober Assessment of the Growing U.S. Asylum Backlog,” updated December 22, 2022.

- ▶ **Institutional partners.** The national resettlement agency overseeing this model could delegate one of three institutional partners to provide support to Afghan evacuees through the local offices of national institutional partners. This allowed OAW beneficiaries to settle in locations without an LRA. Sign-off was required from an SRC for this kind of placement.
- ▶ **Sponsor Circles Program.** Under the Sponsor Circles Program, OAW cases were placed with a group of private individuals who formally agreed to provide support and services during Afghan evacuees' first 90 days in the country, equivalent to those provided by LRAs. This includes financial support, providing housing and basic necessities, enrolling beneficiaries in public benefits, and providing support in accessing relevant services and obtaining employment. Sponsor circles were required to submit a formal application and a plan for receiving newcomers as well as to complete introductory training, but they were not required to receive approval from an SRC.⁴¹ The Sponsor Circles Program is now being utilized to provide resources such as application support and toolkits to interested financial supporters in population-specific humanitarian parole programs (e.g., U4U and CHNV).

The rollout of several different forms of community engagement, each with its own requirements, communication modalities, and actors introduced a considerable amount of complexity to the sector at the same time that SRCs and LRAs were struggling to keep pace with the immediate needs of new arrivals. While SRCs described their appreciation in interviews for the willingness of community groups and new voluntary agencies to provide support, many also voiced concerns about community groups that had little knowledge of the resettlement and social service sector and were thus ill-prepared to receive humanitarian arrivals, placing additional strain on resettlement agencies. State coordinators also complained of having little to no communication with many sponsor groups or knowledge of sponsorship beneficiaries in their communities until problems arose.⁴²

In parallel with the new placement and sponsorship models trialed under OAW, PRM launched a private sponsorship program for refugees in January 2023. Known as Welcome Corps, this program matches refugees with vetted private sponsors through compatibility assessments or a particular connection (e.g., family members or cause-oriented organizations with refugees of related identities). Sponsors are responsible for funding and providing the core services that refugees arriving via the traditional resettlement program receive during the 90-day R&P period.⁴³ Welcome Corps has consolidated some of the initiatives created for and lessons learned from OAW, including bringing in a diverse group of local and national stakeholders to consult on the design of the sponsorship program during its pilot phase.

The rollout of several different forms of community engagement, each with its own requirements, communication modalities, and actors introduced a considerable amount of complexity to the sector.

41 Sponsor Circles, "Frequently Asked Questions," accessed January 1, 2023.

42 Author interview with state refugee coordinator in the Northeast, August 25, 2023; author interview with state refugee coordinator in the West, July 18, 2022; author interview with state refugee coordinator in the Midwest, July 28, 2022.

43 WelcomeCorps, "Frequently Asked Questions," accessed January 24, 2023.

Taken together, these developments have resulted in rapid growth in the diversity and scale of humanitarian arrivals across a range of new pathways and with the involvement of new actors. These factors underscore the urgent need to ensure that consultation processes among local and national actors involved in welcoming refugees and other humanitarian entrants are designed and undertaken in ways that make them meaningful, relevant, and effective in anticipating and addressing local capacity needs.

4 Goals versus Reality: The Pitfalls of Consultation in Practice

The consultation guidelines provided by ORR and PRM set a baseline of practice to ensure that, at the very least, communities are informed about the demographic profile of incoming refugee arrivals and representatives of law enforcement, school districts, or other key local stakeholders have an opportunity to meet with resettlement agencies. Through its mandatory reporting guidelines, ORR and PRM have opportunities to synthesize and report out on best practices as a publicly available resource (a type of resource that once existed on the Refugee Processing Center website but has since been removed⁴⁴).

Yet while these guidelines are helpful, the consultation procedures they establish are on their own insufficient to create the needed level of meaningful dialogue between actors, both locally and at different levels of governance, and to ensure that necessary capacity information is incorporated into resettlement decision-making on actual refugee admissions, local allocations, and placements. And in fact, stakeholders consulted for this study saw a number of different priorities for consultations, many of which go beyond what is stipulated in guidelines; these range from simple information exchange, to developing common understandings about consultation, to problem-solving and identifying challenges to work through as a community. The current structure of consultations is not conducive to meeting these varied goals. For example, while most stakeholders agreed that consultations should feature two-way communication and information exchange between the conveners and participants, in practice, opportunities for participants to provide input are often limited.⁴⁵ In addition, the basic requirements of formal consultation leave several major gaps that hinder the ability of SRCs, LRAs, and other resettlement partners to fully plan for integrating refugees and other humanitarian populations and assess communities' absorptive capacity.

Through interviews and focus groups with national and local resettlement actors, SRCs, and various community stakeholders involved in welcoming humanitarian newcomers, MPI researchers identified common challenges related to how resettlement consultations play out in practice. These key findings are described in the remainder of this section and form the basis for the recommendations outlined in Section 5.

44 A resource detailing best practices in consultation was once available on the Refugee Processing Center website; however, it was no longer available at the time of this report. See Refugee Processing Center, "Resources," accessed February 26, 2023.

45 Author interview with state refugee health coordinator in the Southwest, July 26, 2022; author interview with former community engagement and sponsorship manager at a national resettlement agency, August 25, 2022; author interview with state refugee health coordinator in the Southeast, August 22, 2022; author interview with director for resettlement for a national resettlement agency, August 4, 2022; participant comments during a focus group conducted by MPI in San Diego, CA, August 30, 2022.

Finding 1: Less prescriptive agendas allow for more meaningful dialogue.

Due to the need to meet certain reporting requirements and time constraints, state and local stakeholders report that quarterly consultations tend to favor the presentation of information over soliciting input, with some describing the series of federally required agenda items as a box-ticking exercise.⁴⁶ In addition, because the convenings heavily feature the data PRM requires resettlement agencies to provide, discussions tend to involve participants reacting to a lot of top-down information without sufficient time for proactive conversation.⁴⁷

Some stakeholders may not even be aware that they have the option of engaging in back-and-forth dialogue during these consultations, rather than being limited to passively receiving information. One SRHC cautioned that a consultation audience may not be aware that they can or should provide feedback, which may diminish the richness or candor of a session.⁴⁸ Participants who are not actively engaged in dialogue may feel less invested in the process; for example, some interviewees shared anonymously that they feel consultation sessions contain redundancies of previous sessions and are not particularly useful beyond the receipt of basic information.⁴⁹ If participants are aware that certain agenda items such as data briefings are required and that the solicitation of feedback is encouraged in the federal guidelines, the value of consultation may trend more positively.

Finally, the way consultations are structured is arguably not conducive to having open conversations about difficult challenges communities may face in welcoming refugees—for instance, issues related to accommodating new students who have large gaps in their formal education or explaining historic race relations between law enforcement and minorities to

Black refugees. While many participants believe one of the main goals of consultation should be to identify challenges and problem-solve,⁵⁰ the structure and limited agenda of many consultation processes do not lend themselves well to this. For example, a focus group participant in Greensboro, North Carolina, noted that it is important for consultations to provide a space to not only receive and provide updates, but to raise

A focus group participant in Greensboro, North Carolina, noted that it is important for consultations to provide a space to not only receive and provide updates, but to raise concerns and troubleshoot them.

46 Author interview with director for resettlement for a national resettlement agency, August 4, 2022; author interview with state refugee coordinator in the Midwest, July 28, 2022; author interview with Michele Einspar, Program Manager, San Diego Unified School District, September 8, 2022.

47 Author interview with state refugee coordinator in the Southeast, July 11, 2022. This finding is consistent with one from a 2020 report by the Center for Migration Studies and Refugee Council USA, as part of which more than 500 resettlement stakeholders were surveyed on consultation and a majority cited agenda limitations and time constraints as a barrier to success. See Tables 5 and 6 of Donald Kerwin and Mike Nicholson, *Charting a Course to Rebuild and Strengthen the US Refugee Admissions Program* (New York City: Center for Migration Studies and Refugee Council USA, 2020), 24–26.

48 Author interview with state refugee health coordinator in the Southwest, July 26, 2022.

49 Author interview with school administrator in San Diego, CA, August 31, 2022; author interview with public servant in Dallas, TX, August 18, 2022.

50 Author interview with state refugee health coordinator in the Southeast, August 22, 2022; author interview with workforce coordinator at a local city employment and training agency, August 29, 2022; participant comments during a focus group conducted by MPI in San Diego, CA, August 22, 2022; participant comments during a focus group conducted by MPI in Sacramento, CA, August 23, 2022; author interview with state refugee coordinator in the Southwest, July 26, 2022.

concerns and troubleshoot them.⁵¹ Consultations with a broader issue agenda could help facilitate this type of constructive exchange, both hastening the resolution of important issues and illuminating challenges that ought to be elevated to the state and national levels.

Finding 2: Relationship-building outside of quarterly consultations is often critical to successful resettlement.

There is strong evidence that resettlement can be deeply relational, with informal discussions of community capacity and information sharing highly important to the successful implementation of resettlement programs.⁵² Numerous stakeholders interviewed for this report affirmed the importance of frequent one-on-one communication between LRAs, SRCs, and community service providers.⁵³ It is easy to understand how the value of such organic relationships can be especially important in improving timely and effective cross-organizational coordination around needs for resettlement programming, particularly those that arise suddenly.

However, several interviewees noted that formal quarterly consultations themselves are not sufficient to build up these relationships; in fact, some stakeholders reported that the most informative communication between partners happens outside of the quarterly meetings.⁵⁴ For example, one representative of a national resettlement agency said, “I think we get into trouble when the only communication that’s left are those quarterly consultations.”⁵⁵ And as Diya Abdo, the Founder and Director of Every Campus A Refuge, explained, “The formal sharing of capacity is something that happens at the consultation...but not the building of capacity.”⁵⁶

Some LRAs and system stakeholders have engaged in creative efforts to build these relationships in other ways. In Dallas, Texas, for example, several local coalitions—including the Metroplex Refugee Forum, the Dallas Area Refugee Forum, and the Vickery Meadow quarterly forum—have joined efforts to exchange information and work together to address refugee-specific issues in the metropolitan area, the City of Dallas, and a Dallas neighborhood that has received large numbers of humanitarian newcomers, respectively.⁵⁷ In Greensboro, North Carolina, focus group participants described a monthly meeting of the directors of all refugee-serving agencies, including some that are not federally contracted, to discuss the successes and challenges of resettlement operations in the area.⁵⁸ And in Wisconsin, the SRC noted that she has encouraged the contract managers in her office to develop close personal relationships with the LRAs they oversee, explaining that “I want the contract managers on my team to know how each one of their

51 Participant comments during a focus group conducted by MPI in Greensboro, NC, August 23, 2022.

52 Author interview with vice president of a national resettlement agency, July 15, 2022; participant comments during a focus group conducted by MPI in San Diego, CA, August 22, 2022; Bethany Boyland and Angela Gaffney, *Understanding the Intersection between TANF and Refugee Cash Assistance Services: Findings from a Survey of State Refugee Coordinators*, OPRE Report 2017-75 (Washington, DC: HHS Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, 2017); Caroline Nagel and Breanne Grace, “Navigating the ‘Refugee Ecosystem’ in Research at Home,” *Geographical Review*, 2023.

53 Author interview with state refugee coordinator in the Southeast, July 11, 2022; author interview with director for refugee and integration services at a national resettlement agency, July 25, 2022; author interview with executive director of a local resettlement agency, July 11, 2022; participant comments during a focus group conducted by MPI in San Diego, CA, August 22, 2022.

54 Author interview with state refugee health coordinator in the Southwest, July 26, 2022.

55 Author interview with vice president of a national resettlement agency, July 15, 2022.

56 Author interview with Diya Abdo, Founder and Director, Every Campus A Refuge, August 23, 2022.

57 Author interview with refugee school impact administrator at a local school district, July 27, 2022.

58 Participant comments during focus groups conducted by MPI in Greensboro, NC, August 22 and August 23, 2022.

contracted [resettlement] agencies breathes, and what issues they face the minute they face it, not a month from now. I want them to be in constant communication with the contracted resettlement agencies.”⁵⁹

These important relationship-building efforts are not captured in reporting requirements, which are overly focused on documenting compliance with formal consultation requirements. LRAs and SRCs are required to prove that they have invited certain participants to consultation meetings, to take attendance on which local systems are represented at the meetings, and to take notes on the topics discussed. LRAs consistently found to be out of compliance are typically subject to internal review from their national resettlement agency and/or representatives from PRM. In extreme cases, quarterly consultations may be paused and restructured to improve attendance.

Resettlement agencies thus feel a certain degree of pressure to meet and document the letter of these requirements and ensure high rates of attendance at consultations. Participants of two separate focus groups in Greensboro, North Carolina, also pointed out that full attendance by all required parties is exceptionally difficult to achieve, given the often busy schedules of resettlement practitioners.⁶⁰ When LRAs have strong working relationships and communication channels with community stakeholders, a missed consultation is less likely to disrupt the flow of critical information between resettlement partners.

Finding 3: Opening consultation spaces to divergent views and nontraditional resettlement actors can bring essential insights and new partnerships.

The federal government is clear about who should be included and what should be discussed during quarterly consultation sessions (see Table 1). LRAs are required to invite the SRC and SRHC; local government representatives; the local offices of health, education, welfare, and public safety; and other refugee-serving community-based organizations. Quarterly consultations are often by invitation only and involve immigrant-serving organizations and service providers that may be like-minded in their positions on immigration and welcoming city policies.⁶¹ This study’s interviewees and focus group participants suggested this dynamic is particularly visible in politically conservative states, in which sensitive information about arrivals could be used to jeopardize the safety of recent arrivals or advance unsubstantiated claims and destructive rhetoric.⁶² In the case study sites, most interviewees reported that quarterly consultations are typically attended by a cohort of the same people each time, some having participated for a decade or more.⁶³

Because many sessions are by invitation only or circulated exclusively within well-established networks, there is an increased risk of groupthink and less opportunity for new organizations or those with different viewpoints to contribute to consultations. One long-time, regular consultation participant in Dallas–Fort

59 Author interview with Bojana Zorić Martinez, State Refugee Coordinator, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, July 28, 2022.

60 Participant comments during focus groups conducted by MPI in Greensboro, NC, August 22 and August 23, 2022.

61 To be a certified welcoming city through Welcoming America, a locality must meet certain criteria in seven different areas of focus. Localities are ranked from 1 to 5 (least to most welcoming). Localities do not need to be certified in this system in order to receive refugees. See Welcoming America, *Become a Welcoming Community* (N.p.: Welcoming America, 2023).

62 Participant comments during a focus group conducted by MPI in San Diego, CA, August 22, 2022; author interview with executive director of a local resettlement agency, July 11, 2022; author interview with welcoming communities and immigrant affairs division officer at a local city government office, August 2, 2022.

63 Author interview with coordinator of a refugee outreach program at a local public hospital, July 27, 2022; author interview with founder of a volunteer guide to a city’s refugee service agencies, July 26, 2022.

Worth, Texas, found that participants are not typically willing to say systems are overwhelmed or at capacity due to their position as advocates for resettlement.⁶⁴ Another participant working in a government office in a certified welcoming city felt that conversations about scarcity or capacity strain are discouraged because they are seen as contradictory to the idea that all are welcome without reservation.⁶⁵ Others feel that improving representation from sectors not traditionally included in consultations, such as philanthropy or ethnic community-based organizations, could better illustrate the diversity of partners in certain communities and potentially build new connections and support to address resettlement needs.⁶⁶

This observation is certainly not to suggest that consultations ought to reserve space for corrosive, non-constructive rhetoric simply because it represents a difference of opinion; instead, it is intended to highlight the risk of creating a space where dissent cannot be worked through because of an underlying fear of articulating criticism. Certainly, inviting new or opposing voices into the consultation process can be challenging, and vastly different local contexts mean that one-size-fits-all approaches should be avoided. But given the growing complexity of the humanitarian policy and service landscape in recent years, exploring ways to diversify consultation participants is clearly important. Doing so will be critical both to ensure that well-grounded concerns can be given due consideration and that a fuller range of local system actors and relevant information can be included in resettlement capacity discussions.

Finding 4: Consultations that explicitly account for other populations and longer-term integration issues can lead to fuller understanding of a community's welcoming capacity.

Refugees and other ORR-eligible populations are by no means the only people that access support via local systems, and in many instances, they make up a small part of an average consultation participant's overall purview. One focus group participant in Greensboro, North Carolina noted, "It is great that we are preparing for refugee programming, but there are other human beings coming that are also taking spaces and resources."⁶⁷ However, there are no formal consultation mechanisms to plan for the imminent arrival of these other immigrant and humanitarian populations, and expanding consultation participants (whether to nontraditional refugee resettlement actors, as in the preceding finding, or to actors that serve other populations) may require a good deal of capacity-building for LRAs before the benefits of doing so can be realized. Nevertheless, weaving into consultations a broader view of other high-challenge populations is both achievable and imperative in order to build a realistic picture of local capacities.

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⁶⁴ Author interview with coordinator of a refugee outreach program at a local public hospital, July 27, 2022.

⁶⁵ Author interview with welcoming communities and immigrant affairs division officer at a local city government office, August 2, 2022.

⁶⁶ Author interview with Diya Abdo, Founder and Director, Every Campus A Refuge, August 23, 2022; author interview with state refugee health coordinator in the Southeast, August 22, 2022.

⁶⁷ Participant comments during a focus group conducted by MPI in Greensboro, NC, August 22, 2022.

The need to improve the exchange of information on other populations has only grown as new humanitarian pathways have been created. For example, both Afghan and Ukrainian parolees are eligible for ORR-funded benefits and services, and the arrival of large numbers of these newcomers in certain states has thus created new demands on local service infrastructure. Yet, resettlement agencies report that while they were provided with the proper information to plan and consult with their communities for the arrival of Afghans, they have not received similar information regarding Ukrainian arrivals from USCIS (the agency that has led the design and implementation of U4U). In particular, resettlement agencies report receiving minimal information about where, geographically, Ukrainians intend to settle, meaning they have equally minimal ability to anticipate Ukrainian parolees' need for their services, such as in cases where parolees receive inadequate assistance from their supporter or where the supporter–parolee relationship breaks down.⁶⁸ Collecting and communicating this information via both formal and informal consultation channels would enable local resettlement networks to better support U.S. emergency interventions and plan for the impact these measures will have on their capacity.

Consultation, by design, is also largely concerned with communities' ability to support refugees during their first 90 days in the country, rather than plans for their long-term integration. Becky Jordan, State Refugee Coordinator in Kentucky, explained during a Summer 2022 interview, "They often don't think about the folks that are still being served by health departments or school districts. They're thinking about 2023. And the community stakeholders are saying 'I still have all these people in my clinics and school rooms.'"⁶⁹ Alongside longer-term refugee residents, secondary migration (wherein refugees move to another community after being resettled) can cause significant discrepancies between the number of resettled refugees that agencies receive during consultation and the number of families they actually serve, making it difficult for those agencies to plan. Yet secondary migration is not accounted for in consultations.⁷⁰ This limited focus on specific populations at a specific point in the resettlement process neglects the reality that conversations about long-term integration are just as, if not more, important as those on initial reception. Without dedicated time to discuss long-term trends, quarterly consultations miss an important opportunity to advance a much-needed continuum of services.

Finally, consultations currently do not consider the presence of either asylum-seeking or unauthorized individuals within communities. While neither population is eligible for ORR-funded services, both may access other public services, such as schools and certain adult education and nutrition programs (e.g., the Women, Infants, and Children Program) that are also utilized by some refugees. In some locations, asylum seekers and unauthorized immigrants actually use services in much higher numbers than refugees,⁷¹ and they are thus an important factor in determining local service capacity. If consultations are unable to evolve to account for a fuller picture of the demands placed on local services, they may deteriorate in relevancy, seeing their purpose of preparing for refugee arrivals eclipsed by the mounting demands of other humanitarian groups and immigrant populations.

68 MPI researcher conversation with HHS official, January 30, 2023; MPI researcher conversation with state refugee coordinator in the Southwest, March 9, 2023; MPI researcher conversation with DHS official, February 3, 2023.

69 Author interview with Becky Jordan, Kentucky State Refugee Coordinator, Catholic Charities of Louisville, KY, July 11, 2022.

70 Author interview with workforce coordinator at a local city employment and training agency, August 29, 2022; author interview with director of family community engagement and multilingual services in a local school district, August 31, 2022.

71 Participant comments during a focus group conducted in Greensboro, NC, August 23, 2022; participant comments during a focus group conducted by MPI in Sacramento, CA, August 23, 2022.

Finding 5: More opportunities are needed for formal communication and consultation with sponsors and new resettlement actors.

Alongside the increasing diversity of vulnerable populations served by stakeholders in many communities, the diversity and number of actors involved in resettlement operations has also grown. The expanding role of sponsorship programs, which place private individuals in charge of providing initial support and services for refugees and some humanitarian parolees, was reported as a concern by some local actors in interviews and focus groups. Some SRCs also raised concerns about whether private individuals serving as sponsors have sufficient knowledge of the resettlement and service infrastructure to navigate these systems and fulfill their responsibilities independently. Kathy Yang, the former SRC in California observed, “While very well intentioned and approved through the federal process to serve as sponsors, many of our sponsor families have very limited understanding about the network of refugee resettlement, just how complex it is, and the diversity of partners who are involved in this space.”⁷²

Any gaps in sponsors’ knowledge or preparation can become particularly relevant for resettlement agencies because LRAs are tasked with taking on new cases when private sponsors do not fulfill their obligations or abandon their commitments (known as “sponsor breakdown”). Yet, LRAs often do not have a full picture of who or how many refugee families are arriving in their communities through sponsorship channels. Under the new Welcome Corps program, SRCs are not required to consent to the placement of sponsored refugees in their state, and as already mentioned, the U4U program does not release data on where sponsored Ukrainians intend to settle.

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In addition to information gaps, LRAs and SRCs can also lack clear channels for communicating with sponsor groups. Individual sponsors are not typically included in formal consultation processes. Yet many resettlement stakeholders emphasized the need for some form of ongoing engagement with private sponsors in their areas.⁷³ While sponsors under OAW and the new Welcome Corps program are provided with training on the resettlement process and services, and organizations affiliated with the Community Sponsorship Hub provide ongoing oversight, much of the information presented in trainings is developed with a general, national audience in mind and is not tailored to the very individual and evolving nature of state laws and service structures.⁷⁴

Opportunities for communication between local actors and sponsors can thus be extremely important for the success of a sponsorship relationship. Without state- and locality-specific information about how to access public services and benefits, information that SRCs and LRAs are uniquely positioned to provide,

72 Author interview with Kathy Yang, former State Refugee Coordinator, California Refugee Programs Bureau, Department of Health and Human Services, August 29, 2022.

73 Author interview with state refugee coordinator, August 29, 2022; participant comments during a focus group conducted by MPI in Greensboro, NC, August 23, 2022; author interview with founder of a volunteer guide to a city’s refugee service agencies, July 26, 2022; author interview with former senior leadership, Community Sponsorship Hub, August 24, 2022.

74 MPI researcher interview with state refugee coordinator in the Southwest, March 9, 2023.

or knowledge of who to turn to for this information, sponsors will be unprepared and unable to provide arriving refugees or parolees with necessary support. And for their part, LRAs and SRCs may be blindsided by questions coming from sponsors about refugees in their localities who were previously unknown to them. Establishing clear and open channels of communication between sponsors and local agencies and state offices could help to mitigate these risks.

In interviews and focus groups, resettlement actors raised various options for establishing and maintaining communication with sponsorship groups. Some interviewees suggested that the resettlement knowledge gap between the average consultation attendee and a community sponsor is too wide for the latter to reasonably participate in the formal consultation process.⁷⁵ For example, one preliminary study found that despite the training and information private and community sponsors receive on the resettlement process, many lack awareness of their responsibilities, identity-based sensitivities, and a basic understanding of the differences between refugees and other humanitarian populations (e.g., asylum seekers).⁷⁶ Other stakeholders proposed creating smaller, more tailored spaces to provide sponsors with resources and information that are less centered on arrivals data and more geared toward individuals with little to no prior resettlement experience.⁷⁷ Focus group participants in Greensboro, North Carolina and Sacramento, California suggested dedicating open forum spaces for sponsors to ask questions about the resettlement program, and others stated that a formalized training element that is longer, more consistent, and more robust is necessary to engage with sponsors.⁷⁸ Information about the location of approved private sponsor groups is available to SRCs; however, the availability of staff dedicated to perform sponsor outreach is highly dependent on the state.

Efforts to more regularly engage with sponsors could help ensure that individuals doing resettlement work outside of the traditional R&P framework are aware of challenges, opportunities, and updates to the same extent that formal actors are. Certainly, this would create additional work for resettlement partners on the front end, but it would be a worthy endeavor nonetheless if it reduces the strain on resettlement and other service systems caused by sponsor breakdowns.

Finding 6: Valuable information is shared during consultations, but this is not always taken into account in national resettlement allocations and decision-making.

ORR, resettlement agencies, and SRCs may to varying degrees influence decisions about how many refugees are admitted to the United States and where in the country they are placed, but the power to decide ultimately rests with the federal government. The State Department, the federal agency responsible for

75 Author interview with state refugee coordinator in the Northeast, August 25, 2022; author interview with state refugee health coordinator in the Southeast, August 22, 2022.

76 Presentation by Pablo Bose, Professor, University of Vermont, *Community Sponsored Resettlement in the U.S. – Evaluating a New Approach*, at the Reimagining Refugee Resettlement Switchboard Research Symposium, Phoenix, AZ, August 23, 2023.

77 Author interview with state refugee coordinator in the Southeast, July 11, 2022; author interview with director of resettlement services at a national resettlement agency, July 11, 2022; author interview with workforce coordinator at a local city employment and training agency, August 29, 2022; author interview with director for refugee and integration services at national resettlement agency, July 25, 2022.

78 Participant comments during a focus group conducted by MPI in Sacramento, CA, August 23, 2022; author interview with executive director of a local resettlement agency, July 11, 2022; author interview with state refugee coordinator in the Southeast, July 11, 2022.

foreign relations, makes recommendations to Congress on behalf of the president (see Table 1), proposing an admissions ceiling that carries significant ramifications on the domestic side. While the quarterly consultations provide an opportunity to discuss community capacity, the primary vehicle for determining refugee admissions, case allocations to VOLAGS, and placements within communities is the R&P grant application submitted by national resettlement agencies.

The R&P grant application process takes place when national resettlement agencies apply for funding in response to the State Department’s annual notice of funding opportunity (NOFO). National resettlement agencies are expected to develop a proposed number for how many individuals they can resettle across their network in consultation with their local affiliates.⁷⁹ Several resettlement network stakeholders described this process, many expressing that they typically defer to affiliates’ wishes first and foremost.⁸⁰ Casey Leyva, former Director of Initial Resettlement of World Relief reasoned, “They know their local community better than we do.”⁸¹

As a part of the application, LRAs are required to share the numbers they have proposed to their national agency with a member from every community sector whose representation is mandated at quarterly consultations. Resettlement agencies must note the details of this consultation, which may or may not coincide with the quarterly consultations. These conversations are supposed to include any concerns raised regarding a community’s capacity.⁸² The State Department’s NOFO for the R&P program for FY 2023 makes several references to this consultation process, but perhaps the most compelling is this: “Applicants should base their placement plans... on the capacity of their network of local affiliates, which will need to have consulted with resettlement partners in their communities in order to assess the capacity of the state, local community(ies), and affiliates to ensure that sufficient capacity exists to resettle the proposed caseload.”⁸³

The NOFO language indicates that the quarterly consultation is deeply embedded into the admissions proposal process by way of placement planning, but experiences on the ground tell a different story. For example, interview and focus group participants in San Diego, California reported feeling that their input is not valued, and that it does not affect the arrival numbers they are briefed on.⁸⁴ This disconnect calls back to Findings 1 and 3 related to the perceived constraints arising from the structure of consultations (e.g., no time for capacity discussions due to fixed agenda requirements, lack of understanding of the purpose of consultation, incomplete participant representation metrics) and how this directly impedes the effectiveness of the process.

79 See the “Funding Procedures” section of Department of State, “FY 2023 Notice of Funding Opportunity for Reception and Placement Program,” updated April 19, 2022.

80 Author interview with director of resettlement services at a national resettlement agency, July 11, 2022; author interview with director for refugee and integration services at a national resettlement agency, July 25, 2022; author interview with senior program manager at a national resettlement agency, August 31, 2022; author interview with senior director of resettlement and integration at a national resettlement agency, August 11, 2022.

81 Author interview with Casey Leyva, former Director of Initial Resettlement at World Relief, July 18, 2022.

82 See Appendix E, “Consultations,” from Department of State, “FY 2023 Notice of Funding Opportunity.”

83 See “Funding Procedures” from Department of State, “FY 2023 Notice of Funding Opportunity.”

84 Participant comments during a focus group conducted by MPI in San Diego, CA, August 23, 2022; author interview with director of refugee career pathways program at a local community college, August 30, 2022.

Moreover, new humanitarian pathways, including U4U and CHNV, are not included in the presidential determination or the NOFO process. Rather, admissions targets for these programs have so far been set by USCIS, independently of the process for setting the refugee resettlement ceiling or allocations—even though these programs have affected many of the same communities as resettlement. If quarterly consultations are merely a space for the community to react to what is happening (and with regard to only certain types of admissions) rather than to proactively inform what is to come, this could significantly damage participant buy-in for these consultations as a means to have a voice in the resettlement process.

5 Principles for Effective Consultation: Promising Practices and Recommendations

The gaps between how resettlement consultations are statutorily defined and how they function in practice, as well as promising practices that have emerged in some communities, point to opportunities to make consultations more effective even within the limitations of their current structure. Building on these insights, this section offers recommendations for federal partners, state and local governments, resettlement agencies, state coordinators, and other stakeholders seeking to improve the consultation process and coordination within U.S. humanitarian pathways operations more broadly.

A. *Encourage Consultations Co-Convened by Resettlement Agencies and State Coordinators in Collaboration with Local Leadership*

LRAs often take the lead on quarterly consultations, and the role of SRCs varies widely from state to state and even between localities. However, interview and focus group participants described quarterly consultations as more effective and easier to manage when LRAs and SRCs co-convene them and when local stakeholders have small but meaningful roles in agenda-setting or session leadership.⁸⁵ Co-convened sessions can be more effective for multiple reasons, including because responsibility for planning and facilitation is more evenly distributed, participants receive information that is jointly coordinated between state and local leadership, and the consultation agenda is likely to feature a more diverse set of locally relevant issues and concerns balanced with state-level vantage points.

Co-convening could take several forms: 1) the SRC or a representative from their office could work closely with the executive director or other staff member of one or more LRAs to coordinate and host all quarterly consultation sessions together; or 2) the SRC and the LRAs could alternate coordination responsibility. Importantly, joint convening of quarterly consultations is permitted, given the notable overlap in federal mandates, but there is no formal guidance on what that would look like. In states already doing this, SRCs and LRAs share responsibility for performing outreach, overseeing facilitation, and maintaining an accurate record of what transpires for their respective compliance measures.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Author interview with director of resettlement services at a national resettlement agency, July 11, 2022; author interview with senior program manager at a national resettlement agency, August 31, 2022.

⁸⁶ Author interview with state refugee coordinator in the South, July 11, 2022.

While this model of co-convening may not work in every state, those using this model report a more comprehensive presentation of information that balances the local perspective of an LRA with a wider state of play from the SRC.⁸⁷ Some interview participants emphasized the importance of incorporating the SRC into consultations because they have a clearer view of emerging policy issues within their own purview (e.g., RSS allocations) as well as policy or legislative shifts affecting the entire state, and they may attend briefings that are unavailable to someone at the local level.⁸⁸ For example, one stakeholder highlighted that SRCs and SRHCs are in a position to provide “invaluable” state, national, and international information that local leadership may not have access to.⁸⁹

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Shared responsibility has the added value of relieving LRAs of some of the administrative burden involved in planning and convening the sessions.⁹⁰ In addition, one SRC noted that SRCs, particularly those situated within a state agency, may have more access to government leaders, larger philanthropies, and nontraditional partners who they can pull in to consultations to broaden the conversation or share insights and resources on specific topics.⁹¹ ORR and PRM can play a role in encouraging co-convening by producing joint guidance that offers specific recommendations for SRCs and LRAs on the sharing of convening responsibilities. In November 2023, ORR initiated a 60-day period of soliciting comment from SRCs on proposed changes to the ORR state plan, including enhanced requirements for collaboration and descriptions of how SRCs plan to lead consultations or co-lead with LRAs in coordination with the SRHC.⁹²

Co-convening can also lead to stronger, more focused agendas. Because conveners are expected to cover a wide breadth of material during consultations, this can lead to a sense of disorientation or disorganization among participants or the feeling that the consultation is a box-ticking exercise among conveners. To avoid these pitfalls, conveners report success when the consultation is tailored to address the most urgent challenges, as identified by local stakeholders. Creating or co-creating the agenda with relevant community participants and limiting a portion of the conversation to one or two subjects that cut across systems (e.g., enrollment challenges, low-incidence languages, resource scarcity) in advance of the session may facilitate richer, more focused conversations.⁹³

87 Participant comments during a focus group conducted by MPI in San Diego, CA, August 23, 2022; author interview with former community engagement and sponsorship manager at a national resettlement agency, August 25, 2022.

88 Author interview with director of new American programs at a local resettlement agency, August 29, 2022; author interview with workforce coordinator at a local city employment and training agency, August 29, 2022; author interview with senior program manager at a national resettlement agency, August 31, 2022; author interview with state refugee health coordinator in the Southwest, July 26, 2022.

89 Author interview with state refugee health coordinator in the Southwest, July 26, 2022.

90 Author interview with director of resettlement services at a national resettlement agency, July 11, 2022.

91 Author interview with former state refugee coordinator in the West, August 29, 2022.

92 HHS Administration for Children and Families, “Proposed Information Collection Activity”; author email exchange with program staff at national resettlement agency, November 15, 2023.

93 Author interview with state refugee coordinator in the Midwest, July 28, 2022.

Holding topic-specific breakout groups or allowing community stakeholders to lead portions of the conversation are also valuable strategies for nurturing a more valuable exchange of information during quarterly consultation sessions.⁹⁴ To accomplish this, LRAs and SRCs should consider engaging community stakeholders in small roles as part of the agenda-setting and convening process (e.g., requesting a presentation from local emergency services). In addition to spreading the administrative burden more widely and boosting the local relevance of the session, this may increase community awareness of the purpose of consultation, which may in turn lead to more constructive, two-way dialogue. More broadly, these approaches can help foster community buy-in by ensuring that consultations address community needs both equitably and grounded in the local context.

B. Provide Dedicated Resources and Staffing to Make Consultations More Effective

Consultations are most effective when a dedicated staff person leads or co-leads the planning process and related community outreach, and when sessions feature professional facilitation and streamlined discussion. Interviewed stakeholders and prior research have pointed to professional facilitation's value as a tool to keep discussion energized and on track,⁹⁵ while ensuring that everyone is able to participate in a way that is inclusive and safe.⁹⁶ Securing a paid professional facilitator has not always been viewed as an option, however, because consultation has historically been seen as an unfunded mandate by many LRAs, who are tasked with convening these sessions without designated resources. Some ORR administrative funds are permitted to be used to support consultation activities, and PRM announced a change in administrative structure for FY 2023, which is contingent on funding and applicable through FY 2025 if grantees successfully renew the agreement, that may provide some additional support to consultation activities as well. PRM is expected to provide an additional \$1,050 per individual resettled for affiliate R&P administrative costs, but it is not clear how much, if any, of this funding can be flexed to support consultation activity.⁹⁷

Some resettlement agencies and state offices have opted to designate funding for staff positions to oversee consultation, boosting their ability to achieve both the letter and the spirit of the consultation process requirements. For those that did not or could not make those investments due to financial or staffing limitations, consultation is likely a small, potentially cumbersome responsibility tacked on to a staff member's existing workload. Where feasible, agencies could consider creating an outreach coordinator or community outreach specialist role situated within the SRC's office and/or at an LRA. In Colorado, for example, an outreach and engagement coordinator employed by the state is responsible for convening relevant groups for engagement and information exchange at the state and local levels, and for supporting the consultation process. Colorado's recently formed Office of New Americas has also played a role in

94 Author interview with state refugee coordinator in the Southeast, July 11, 2022; author interview with director of new American programs at a local resettlement agency, August 29, 2022.

95 This was also a recommendation of a 2016 report by Welcoming America. See Welcoming America, *Community Consultations Report: Findings and Recommendations for the Pilot Project* (N.p.: Welcoming America, accessed March 29, 2021); author interview with director for refugee and integration services at a national resettlement agency, July 25, 2022.

96 Author interview with refugee and newcomer coordinator at a local school district, August 31, 2022; author interview with state refugee health coordinator in the Southeast, August 22, 2022.

97 See "Funding Procedures" from Department of State, "FY 2023 Notice of Funding Opportunity."

outreach and convening with other state government agencies, including the Department of Public Safety, to address issues such as housing.⁹⁸

To enable resettlement agencies and state coordinators to employ and train professional staff dedicated to community outreach and consultation functions at least part-time, ORR and PRM could provide dedicated set-aside funding for these positions. Alongside hiring for dedicated positions/roles, it is also important to ensure staff in these positions are adequately equipped with the skills to effectively convene consultations, such as meeting facilitation, conflict resolution, and/or public engagement strategies. ORR and PRM could support this and staff members' ongoing professional growth by identifying ways to distribute best practices collected through their respective reporting requirements.⁹⁹ For example, PRM could do this by reinstating research on the Refugee Processing Center website featuring successful models of community consultation.

C. Include High-Level Representatives of Governors, Mayors, and County Executives in Consultation Processes

Although sensitivity to political persuasions is important in many states, this research suggests that the quality and effectiveness of the consultation process can be greatly improved when a specific office or point of contact is designated to represent appointed state and local governments on refugee-related issues. Interview and focus group participants described how this type of high-level representation can significantly improve a local resettlement network's access to important governmental leaders, strengthening relationships in ways that can open lines of communication to discuss initial reception and long-term integration matters and potentially leverage political power to support this work.¹⁰⁰ Representation from state and local government at quarterly consultations could also bring a new vantage point to these discussions, including insights on factors that have an impact on resettlement capacity (e.g., a sudden influx of asylum seekers) and relevant developments on the political agenda.

In states with an Office for New Americans, a Governor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, or diversity, equity, and inclusion policy initiatives, some interviewees found the appointed representatives to be exceptionally helpful partners on immigration-related issues.¹⁰¹ These officials often have connections that LRAs and SRCs may not have who can help resolve challenges raised during or outside quarterly consultations. If an elected or appointed level of leadership espouses this type of work or involvement, it is usually easier to engage with the government.¹⁰² Engaging local government in consultation is also important because it can raise

⁹⁸ Author interview with state refugee coordinator in the West, July 18, 2022; author interview with vice president of a national resettlement agency, July 15, 2022.

⁹⁹ It is unclear how federal agencies currently use and disseminate the information collected via the reporting process to improve consultations. Though some national resettlement agencies glean best practices from their internal reporting mechanisms, this does not enable other agencies to benefit from these lessons.

¹⁰⁰ Author interview with state refugee coordinator in the South, July 26, 2022; participant comments during a focus group conducted by MPI in Greensboro, NC, August 23, 2022; author interview with executive director of a local resettlement agency, July 11, 2022.

¹⁰¹ Author interview with state refugee coordinator in the West, July 18, 2022; author interview with state refugee coordinator in the South, August 29, 2022.

¹⁰² Author interview with senior leadership, Welcoming America, July 19, 2022.

awareness of barriers to resettlement and bring promising initiatives to the attention of decisionmakers at both the state and potentially federal levels.

State and local governments that do not already have an Office of New Americans should consider creating one or something similar to oversee the integration of newcomers. In December 2022, the White House announced it would be relaunching the Task Force on New Americans, which emphasizes the instrumental role that Offices of New Americans play in immigrant and refugee issues.¹⁰³ The Office of New Americans State Network, which facilitates exchange between these offices and other state government personnel in participating states nationwide, could be used to distribute consultation best practices to other states and localities in the absence of a federal mechanism for doing this.¹⁰⁴ The revived Task Force on New Americans may also provide consultation attendees with an opportunity to elevate integration issues affecting refugees to the White House if their state has a particularly engaged Office of New Americans.

D. Expand Information Sharing to Include Data on Various Populations in Order to Build Comprehensive Understanding of Local Capacity

When LRAs and affected community stakeholders come together to discuss their collective bandwidth to receive and support newcomers, the availability of accurate information and data is essential to informed dialogue. Robust data on federal, state, and local migration trends, including the varied needs and characteristics of different populations resulting from the circumstances of their admission, can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of local capacity and pressing challenges.

Currently, PRM only requires LRAs to share basic counts of and demographic information about recent and projected refugee and SIV arrivals, such as their countries of origin and household size. It is challenging from such data alone to make realistic assessments of local systems' resources and

abilities, particularly at a time when arrivals via various humanitarian admissions streams are increasing and placing new and varied pressures on these systems. For example, it is difficult to ask representatives of local mainstream systems, such as schools or public safety offices, to communicate their capacity without creating the opportunity for them to share information on the other immigrant populations that have an impact on their services.

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Refugees make up a small percentage of the foreign-born individuals that many mainstream local systems serve, and what works for this small group may differ from what works for other humanitarian arrivals, let

¹⁰³ Executive Office of the President, "Executive Order 14012: Restoring Faith in Our Legal Immigration Systems and Strengthening Integration and Inclusion Efforts for New Americans," *Federal Register* 86, no. 23 (February 2, 2021): 8277.

¹⁰⁴ American Immigration Council, "Office of New Americans (ONA) State Network," accessed November 13, 2023.

alone other immigrant groups. This friction point can be better understood through increased, regular information-sharing between organizations squarely focused on meeting the needs of ORR-eligible populations such as refugees and organizations serving a wider swath of a community's immigrants. Transparent information sharing also promotes trust and confidence among stakeholders, fostering a collaborative atmosphere. By promoting a fuller understanding of the capabilities and limitations of each community actor, the consultation process would become more effective and relevant for everyone who participates.

There are numerous opportunities to improve data and information sharing during quarterly consultations and on a more ongoing basis. The following are some examples of how different consultation participants and government leadership can stimulate a two-way flow of information:

- ▶ SRCs should consider providing information on other ORR-eligible immigrant populations—such as their geographic distribution, special needs, health profiles, and arrival trends. This information, which is available to SRCs via the Refugee Arrivals Data System (RADS) online platform,¹⁰⁵ offers a more complete profile of the demands placed on the resettlement system.
- ▶ USCIS should explore ways to systematically collect and disseminate data from arriving U4U and CHNV parolees regarding where they intend to settle. This information should be communicated to SRCs and LRAs along with information about the location of parolees' supporters in order to help local systems anticipate how many parolees they will receive in advance and prepare appropriately, including via resource allocation, staff training, and program adaptations.
- ▶ Government representatives should consider sharing state- and local-level non-personally identifying information about other newcomer populations with SRCs and LRAs during or in advance of consultations. This information may help identify opportunities within a receiving community (e.g., a well-established language group that could help support newcomers who share that language) and pain points (e.g., overextended resources in U.S. schools) that may not otherwise surface during discussions about capacity during quarterly consultation sessions.
- ▶ SRCs and/or LRAs should work with local systems to build a profile of the various immigrant populations, both those eligible for ORR-funded resettlement services and those not, that have an impact on a community's capacity. This would establish a more visible baseline understanding of which populations are accessing which services and where resources ought to be allocated or advocated for. The International Rescue Committee's Switchboard Network, an ORR-funded resettlement technical assistance provider, should consider developing resources to support this process.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ The Refugee Arrivals Data System (RADS) is a secure server for compiling, sending, and receiving data from the federal government regarding ORR-eligible populations.

¹⁰⁶ Switchboard, "Connecting Resettlement Experts," accessed November 11, 2023.

E. Create Federally Supported Opportunities for Communication and Relationship-Building beyond Quarterly Consultations

Quarterly consultations themselves are insufficient to build the meaningful relationships needed to effectively implement resettlement at the local level. These relationships require ongoing and close cooperation and communication. Several stakeholders involved in this study reported that the communication and coordination platforms that emerged between federal entities, SRCs, and resettlement agencies during the OAW response were extremely valuable for building strong working relationships and suggested they could serve as a model for how to strengthen relationships within the resettlement ecosystem more broadly, including by creating more consistent feedback loops and developing a more holistic view of community capacity.¹⁰⁷

At the height of OAW, resettlement capacity was pushed to its limits. The program would not have been possible without ongoing coordination and communication at the local, state, and most importantly, the federal level. This intense communication was a meaningful departure from previous years of disjointed or absent communication, including during high arrivals

under the Obama administration, the Trump-era dissolution of resettlement, and the early pandemic period. The new forms of communication brought together senior representation from PRM, ORR, USCIS, and DHS to discuss matters with SRCs and resettlement agencies. Resettlement leaders had a direct line of communication to the federal government, while federal leadership had a much clearer picture of fractures or dysfunction within the program. Together, they were able to consult with one another and problem-solve to prevent issues from compounding. These close working relationships, which made SRCs and federal government partners more accessible to one another, could form the foundation for more regular coordination going forward.

These close working relationships, which made SRCs and federal government partners more accessible to one another, could form the foundation for more regular coordination going forward.

ORR has since developed interagency working groups involving DHS and PRM representatives that conduct fact-finding in localities receiving large numbers of humanitarian migrants, particularly in border states, and hold biweekly meetings with State Coordinators of Refugee Resettlement (the national association of SRCs) and national resettlement agencies to address various issues in humanitarian pathways (e.g., parole, U4U). Though communication may not be as regular as it once was during OAW, these new and ongoing lines of communication are a promising sign that coordination among federal partners will be more impactful moving forward. Interviewees shared their hope that the increased collaboration experienced during OAW will, at least at the state and local level, persist and that ORR would consider maintaining the communication mechanisms created at the federal level during this period at a somewhat regular cadence.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Author interview with executive director of a local resettlement agency, July 11, 2022; author interview with state refugee coordinator in the Northeast, August 25, 2022; author interview with state refugee coordinator in the South, July 26, 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Author interview with executive director of a local resettlement agency, July 11, 2022.

F. Establish Regular Channels of Communication with New Resettlement Actors, Including Private Sponsors

As new actors enter the humanitarian protection space, ongoing and systematized communication will be paramount. In the case of private sponsorship initiatives, such communication could help proactively address many of the concerns community stakeholders and resettlement professionals have raised about the new pathways. Namely, communication and coordination is essential in preventing sponsor breakdown, which inevitably thrusts resettlement responsibilities onto an LRA or other community-based organization with little to no notice.

Clear communication helps ensure that sponsors understand the specific needs, cultural backgrounds, and service eligibility of the refugees or other humanitarian migrants they are assisting. Localized information and communication, meanwhile, helps sponsors navigate the complex bureaucratic processes involved in resettlement, ensuring that newcomers have access to essential services such as housing, employment, and health care. While it remains to be seen whether consultation is the appropriate venue for this form of communication, the following recommendations can be implemented in the interim:

- ▶ The Community Sponsorship Hub, which oversees the Welcome Corps program, and other national organizations charged with onboarding and overseeing sponsors should ensure that sponsors receive accurate and state/locality-specific information about services and contact points in their communities as part of their training and onboarding. This is particularly important given the differences in benefits and service systems across states (i.e., the Medicaid office in Texas may have different processes for benefits issuance than Connecticut).
- ▶ SRCs and resettlement agencies should create clear communication channels and/or opportunities for information exchange between sponsors and resettlement stakeholders. This would help ensure sponsors receive accurate and up-to-date resettlement information on an ongoing basis, while also respecting the limited capacity of SRCs and other resettlement actors to field large numbers of ad hoc questions. These actors should consider creating a monthly or quarterly call for sponsors to share information and updates on resettlement that are specific to that state, such as the state of affordable housing, welfare policy updates, and new service providers entering the space. States with large numbers of sponsors could also consider setting up designated contact points (e.g., staff members or designated hotlines) for sponsors at the state level to develop these relationships and serve as a resource, as they have in Wisconsin and Colorado.¹⁰⁹
- ▶ PRM, ORR, and USCIS should ensure that, to the extent possible, SRCs and LRAs are informed about the presence of sponsorship groups in their communities and provided sufficient information about the profiles of sponsored newcomers. This information should include arrivals not just through Welcome Corps but also sponsorship-based parole programs (e.g., U4U and CHNV).

¹⁰⁹ Author interview with state refugee coordinator, July 28, 2022; author interview with interim state refugee coordinator, July 18, 2022.

6 Conclusions

With the refugee resettlement and broader humanitarian migration landscape undergoing momentous changes, this is an ideal moment to critically assess and update the community consultation process to maximize its utility for all stakeholders involved. State and local systems are being called on to absorb and adapt to the arrival of increasing—and increasingly diverse—humanitarian migrant arrivals, and the refugee resettlement network and its partners are under pressure to act quickly to support these local actors and adapt their own operations, often without sufficient guidance or resources. The consultation process is uniquely positioned to help stakeholders respond to these changes while continuing to advance the wellbeing of traditionally resettled groups in an environment where capacity is strained. Yet too often, formal consultations are falling short of this potential.

Discourse on consultation in the U.S. humanitarian protection space has never strayed from recognition of the importance of dialogue between decisionmakers and receiving communities. The real question is how to do it effectively. It has become increasingly evident that consultation must adapt to encompass the broader landscape of humanitarian protection, recognizing the impact of diverse newcomer populations and involving more stakeholders. Doing so would make the consultation process both more representative of what communities are experiencing and more able to foster the kind of broad-based collaboration needed to respond to changing local conditions.

The recommendations presented in this report represent practical strategies for improving the functioning and relevance of community consultations. Expanding data sharing, co-convening consultations with local leadership, dedicating resources, fostering ongoing communication, and involving new resettlement actors are all key steps toward a more inclusive, collaborative consultation process. In short, as the refugee resettlement network continues to grow, it is imperative that consultation processes evolve accordingly to ensure they remain relevant and effective in addressing emerging challenges.

As the refugee resettlement network continues to grow, it is imperative that consultation processes evolve accordingly to ensure they remain relevant and effective in addressing emerging challenges.

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Lillie Hinkle is an Associate Policy Analyst with the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy, where they work on issues including refugee resettlement, unaccompanied children's services, and access to benefits and services for immigrant families. Prior to joining MPI, Mx. Hinkle worked with the International Rescue Committee in employment placement and family mentorship, providing services to newly arrived refugee families in Richmond, Virginia.

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