

The Administration of Refugee Resettlement in the United States: An Analysis of the Wilson-Fish Alternative Program

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Abstract

This report explores the characteristics and effects of the Wilson-Fish alternative program of refugee resettlement in the U.S. Twelve states currently have Wilson-Fish programs, which bypass state governments by allowing the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to fund and organize directly with local voluntary agencies. Through a literature review, interview with the director of a voluntary agency in Kentucky, and analysis of FY 2014 data provided by the ORR, I conclude that Wilson-Fish programs are superior to state-run programs in several ways: (1) Wilson-Fish programs are more flexible and allow for local innovation; (2) are more accessible to clients; (3) foster intimate personal connections between clients, staff, and bureaucrats; and (4) have a heightened focus on early employment and self-sufficiency. These advantages have a significant effect on employment rates and progress toward self-sufficiency, as shown in the FY 2014 data. A noted downfall of Wilson-Fish programs is their lack of attention to long-term integration achievable through education, professional training, entrepreneurial endeavors, or other efforts that allow refugees to move beyond entry-level employment opportunities. I recommend that the ORR change its statement of purpose, application requirements, and program guidelines to include attention to clients' success beyond simply reaching self-sufficiency. Due to the understood benefits of Wilson-Fish, I recommend that more states move toward adopting category one or two Wilson-Fish programs.

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Abbreviations

CWS – Church World Service

EMM – Episcopal Migration Ministries

FY – Fiscal Year

HHS – Department of Health and Human Services

INA – Immigration and Nationality Act

KOR – Kentucky Office for Refugees

KRM – Kentucky Refugee Ministries

ORR – Office of Refugee Resettlement (within HHS)

PRM – The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (within the Department of State)

RCA – Refugee Cash Assistance

RESS – Refugee Employment Services System

RMA – Refugee Medical Assistance

USRAP – United States Refugee Admissions Programs

I. Introduction to Refugee Resettlement in the U.S.

Approximately 70,000 refugees from around the world were resettled in the United States annually throughout Barack Obama's presidency, though the administration raised this number to 85,000 for fiscal year (FY) 2016 and made plans to allow 110,000 in FY 2017.¹ Despite repeated attempts from the Trump administration to stifle the resettlement program, the total number of refugees admitted by September 30th, the end of the fiscal year, will likely be near 70,000.² The Department of Homeland Security and the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) handle overseas processing and admission into the U.S. PRM works with nine voluntary agencies and their 350 local affiliates to place incoming refugees into communities across the nation and support their progress toward self-sufficiency.³ PRM spent nearly \$545 million on refugee resettlement in FY 2016.⁴

The Department of Health and Human Service's Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) then supports refugees' progress toward self-sufficiency by providing cash and medical assistance, English classes, employment services, and assistance with nearly every challenge of beginning a new life in the states. The federal government allotted \$1.6 billion for ORR programs in FY 2016.⁵ These funds are distributed to voluntary resettlement agencies at the state level, who administer services to their local refugee clients. Among the 49 states with resettlement programs, 32 distribute the funds using state-run offices, 12 use contracts with nonprofit organizations through the alternative Wilson-Fish program, and 5 use public-private partnerships.⁶

II. Introduction to Wilson-Fish

Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) and Refugee Medical Assistance (RMA) funds are typically distributed to voluntary agencies through state governments. However, this assistance from the ORR is distributed to voluntary agencies in Kentucky and 11 other states through the Wilson-Fish alternative program, which bypasses state governments. The program is based in a 1985 amendment to the INA which authorized the Secretary of HHS to “develop and implement alternative projects for refugees who have been in the United States less than thirty-six months, under which refugees are provided interim support, medical services, support services, and case management, as needed, in a manner that encourages self-sufficiency, reduces welfare dependency, and fosters greater coordination among the resettlement agencies and service providers.”⁷ Senator Pete Wilson penned the amendment with the “specific intention” to reduce welfare dependency among refugees settling in California, his home state.⁸ The first Wilson-Fish project began in 1990 in San Diego County, and is still functioning successfully today.⁹

However, the ORR has used the ability to create alternative programs, meaning refugee assistance programs that are not necessarily state administered, much more broadly to sponsor entire refugee resettlement programs in states which have chosen not to administer state-run resettlement programs at all. For example, the history of the Kentucky Wilson-Fish Program is described in a report from KOR:

On March 1, 1992, the State of Kentucky withdrew from the cash and medical assistance components of the Refugee Resettlement Program. During this time, the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, Migration and Refugee

Services (USCCB-MRS) located in Washington DC had four affiliate programs in Kentucky and considered Kentucky a good environment for resettlement, and was committed to continued resettlement in the State. USCCB-MRS met with the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to discuss the problem and the Wilson/Fish Demonstration Project seemed to be the best option. USCCB invited the other National Voluntary Agencies operating in Kentucky to participate in the Wilson/Fish project. ORR approved the proposal in September of 1992 and USCCB/MRS in Washington DC was awarded the contract.

When the State of Kentucky withdrew from RCA/RMA, the state asked ORR if they could continue to provide refugee social services only. This request included a waiver that would allow the state to provide refugee social services only, but not RCA and RMA. ORR granted this request and extended the waiver through February 28, 1994 but when the state requested a waiver for another year, it was denied. ORR gave the State the option of again providing all three components: RCA, RMA and Refugee Social Services. The State refused to reinstate the RCA and RMA components. Instead, it withdrew completely from the refugee resettlement Program.

ORR met with the Kentucky affiliates in March of 1994 to explore options for continued service delivery. USCCB-MRS agreed to prepare and submit a revised project proposal which included refugee social services and since that time refugees residing in Kentucky have received the full range services under the Kentucky Wilson/Fish Alternative Program. Effective October 1, 2001 USCCB-MRS in Washington DC withdrew as the national administrator of the Kentucky

Wilson-Fish Project and Catholic Charities of Louisville, KY became the state administrator of the Kentucky Wilson-Fish Project.¹⁰

Alabama, Alaska, Tennessee, Louisiana, Nevada, Idaho, North Dakota, and South Dakota have also withdrawn from the Refugee Resettlement Program and now use Wilson-Fish programs; Catholic Charities runs Wilson-Fish in the first five states, Mountain States Group runs the program in Idaho, and Lutheran Social Services runs the program in North and South Dakota. These nine states are considered category one Wilson-Fish projects.

The remaining three states currently using Wilson-Fish, Colorado, Vermont, and Massachusetts, are category two Wilson-Fish projects. These states have not withdrawn from the resettlement program. They have instead decided to use Wilson-Fish alongside the existing state system to bolster the quality of local refugee resettlement.

Because refugee resettlement has become an increasingly partisan political issue, several more states have recently withdrawn from the federal Refugee Resettlement Program. Texas, Kansas, New Jersey, and Maine each announced withdrawal within the past two years. These four states are now transitioning toward adopting category one Wilson-Fish programs. While working through the application process, intermediary systems are functioning. For example, after Texas officially withdrew from the Refugee Resettlement Program in the fall of 2016, the ORR selected four “Regional Replacement Designees” to administer federal funds to voluntary agencies.¹¹ According to a letter from ORR officials to nonprofits, “The Replacement Designees will assume the role previously held by the state of Texas to provide critical services and benefits to refugees,” and this structure will be used “until a later time when proposals and applications

will be considered under the Wilson-Fish Program.”¹² Due to these administrative networks that do not rely upon the state government, state withdrawal from the Refugee Resettlement Program does not halt the resettlement of refugees. In fact, according to a review of the literature and my own empirical research, allowing Wilson-Fish programs to facilitate resettlement will increase the quality of resettlement services offered.

III. Literature Review

There is currently limited information regarding the question of whether Wilson-Fish projects are more effective than state-administered resettlement programs. In fact, one of the most informative studies of the question remarks that “there is precious little research on this topic.”¹³ The following pages are a review of the existing literature supplemented by my own experience interning at Kentucky Refugee Ministries (KRM) in Lexington in the summer of 2016 and by interview with the KRM-Lexington Office Director, Mary Cobb.

First, a 1988 study about early refugee self-sufficiency, one of the first of its kind examining the state of resettlement in the U.S. after the Refugee Act of 1980, examines the effect that the practices of voluntary agencies have on employment success. Of course, Wilson-Fish did not exist until 1990, but the study’s conclusion is notable and relevant. The authors conclude that “the voluntary agency to which a refugee is assigned does have a significant influence on their probability of employment within the first 90 days. Differences in performance between the VOLAGs may be attributable to specific management practices. Also, the management practices that best promote refugee employment may vary by locality.”¹⁴ The first conclusion confirms a base assumption of my research: Voluntary agencies behave differently, and those differences

matter for the success of resettlement programs. The second conclusion, that best practices for resettlement may be different in each state and county, complicates the business of creating broad recommendations to the ORR meant to apply to resettlement all across the U.S. That different locations demand unique practices suggests that the best federal program is the one which allows for flexibility and innovation rather than creating uniform guidelines. As shown in the case of Massachusetts, one benefit of Wilson-Fish is precisely its room for local innovation.

Unlike the category one Wilson-Fish states, Massachusetts uses Wilson-Fish not because its state government does not wish to participate in refugee resettlement but because it believes the Wilson-Fish program allows for better resettlement practices. In a 2004 review of Massachusetts refugee resettlement, Robin Cohen writes that “Massachusetts takes advantage of the ‘Wilson-Fish’ provision in the federal immigration law that allows it to contract with the volags to promote more integrated and innovative approaches to providing cash, medical, employment, and social services to ensure early employment of refugees.”¹⁵ The language Cohen uses when espousing the benefits of Wilson-Fish suggests that the alternative program allows for more flexible administration. Voluntary agencies must adhere to the standardized cooperative agreement with the federal government regardless of whether they operate a Wilson-Fish or state-run program, and there is a separate contract of guidelines specifically for Wilson-Fish programs. However, resettlement agencies in Massachusetts have found that adopting a Wilson-Fish program expands their programming abilities.

The 2008 HHS study reinforces this benefit of Wilson-Fish. After noting that program flexibility is a “key factor related to ORR’s success in getting refugees employed,” Halpern later writes that “the Wilson-Fish program was designed specifically to provide alternative programs for refugees outside of the State-administered system, and the flexibility inherent in this program

allows for the provision of bonuses, incentives and income disregards.”¹⁶ Massachusetts has taken advantage of precisely this benefit of Wilson-Fish programming.

Emel Hadzipasic, director of Massachusetts’ Office for Refugees and Immigrants’ Family Independence Unit, said that “one of the primary reasons the state chose Wilson-Fish was a desire to ensure a ‘seamless’ continuum of services for refugees.”¹⁷ The unique, state operated Wilson-Fish program has allowed Massachusetts to implement an Early Employment Incentive, “a bonus paid to those refugees who accept employment within four months from becoming employable ... Half the incentive is paid when the refugee starts working and the other half after he has been on the job for 90 days. Federal RCA funds pay for the incentive,” and thorough employment services that Hadzipasic believes ensure more “durable” self-sufficiency.¹⁸

As shown in Table 2 in the appendix, the Massachusetts resettlement program boasts remarkable success based on FY 2014 economic outcome measures: A 74% employment rate with \$10.21 average starting hourly wage. The 90-day retention rate of employment is 85%, and 89% of the jobs found offer health benefits. These numbers are very high compared to other states (averages are shown in Table 1 in the next section), and Massachusetts has its innovative use of Wilson-Fish programming to credit for its success.

The San Diego County project, the founding Wilson-Fish program that started in 1990, is a useful case study because resettlement under Wilson-Fish can be compared directly to the local government’s program, San Diego County's Department of Social Services' Refugee Employment Services System (RESS). A 1999 study conducted by a sociology professor at San Diego State University evaluated the two programs qualitatively and quantitatively. The qualitative assessment consisted of interviews with

refugees resettled by each agency. The sample size was only seventeen, but several differences between the two groups emerged.

First, Wilson-Fish clients demonstrated a more intimate connection with the voluntary agency Catholic Charities, its employees, and their community connections. They also found the agency more accessible.

WF refugees almost always referred to the ease with which they could contact the agency should a problem arise, and our question to them was: "To whom do you turn if you need help or have questions about something you don't understand?" Most WF refugees mentioned a network of community members and also people at Catholic Charities. The language they used in referring to these people made it difficult to ascertain when they were referring to employees of Catholic Charities and when they were not. Again, the extra-agency network appeared to be conceptualized as an extension of the agency. In contrast, RESS refugees would tell us that they would call various people at the county, but their description of the amount of effort they had to exert in order to speak with somebody was much greater. They talked in terms of "appointments" and of "going to" various locations dispersed around the county. Their descriptions alluded to a fragmented, discontinuous system of discrete sites with a fairly rigid division of labor. There was very little actual displeasure expressed, and only two of the refugees stated that they had needs that went unmet. They simply communicated a general frustration over the difficulty faced in interacting with the multiple departments. Once the correct person was contacted, the refugees

reported success. RESS refugees almost exclusively made reference to a department or office rather than a person. ... WF refugees were far more likely to say that the agency was very accessible.¹⁹

The notion that Catholic Charities is more personal than RESS was mirrored in my interview with the director of KRM. She expressed that the staff of Catholic Charities in Louisville, Kentucky, are there because they want to be there.²⁰ Employees of nonprofit agencies may be more personally invested in their work than those of a state agency, and it shows in their interactions with refugees and personnel at voluntary agencies.

Personal connections affect the functionality of agencies as well. Wilson-Fish refugees in San Diego County often reported that a personal connection between a staff member at Catholic Charities and a community member helped them find their first job. At times, RESS clients referred to being “sent to” their first jobs. Wilson-Fish clients never used this phrasing, and more often said they were “taken to” their first jobs.²¹ This simple difference in sentence construction reveals a difference in attitude between nonprofit and state agencies. When I worked in the Employment Office of KRM, the Job Developers and I would frequently meet with employers in the community, drive clients to interviews, or bring interpreters to the workplace to facilitate conversation between employers and clients. The Job Developers had personal connections with each client and were truly invested in their success at the workplace.

Another possible manifestation of increased personal investment among nonprofit agencies is the finding in San Diego that Catholic Charities employs more refugees (most often former clients) than does the county. The voluntary agencies in Kentucky also strive to employ

refugees as interpreters, receptionists, caseworkers, job developers, or other staff. Since hiring is less personal in the state bureaucracy, this is less likely to happen in government-run resettlement programs. Including refugees in the agency staff helps the agency act as part of the refugee community rather than an outside hand. Further, a 1995 HHS report studying resettlement across several states found that “matching staff ethnicity, gender and shared experiences to the client appeared to result in more cooperative clients.”²² Former refugee clients may be the best service providers, and they are more likely to be hired in Wilson-Fish programs.

The importance of agency staff’s personal commitment to refugee resettlement is difficult to overstate. A 2008 HHS study asked a sample of federal ORR and voluntary agency workers representing a variety of programs and levels of staff, “In your view, what are the most important programmatic, administrative or other factors that currently contribute to getting refugees employed in the programs funded by ORR?” Staff characteristics were the third most oft-mentioned key factor, ahead of English language training, program flexibility, use of financial incentives for employment, availability of community support for refugees, and many other factors. The two factors that were mentioned more often than staff characteristics were employability services pre- and post- employment, and having an individualized goal-oriented approach.²³

The complaint from RESS clients of having to visit multiple offices scattered across the county is a nationwide problem with state-administered ORR programs. Under a state-administered ORR program, RCA and social services are provided by separate agencies, whereas with Wilson-Fish programs the cash assistance and employment services are provided by only one agency.²⁴ Unity in service provision markedly increases accessibility, and also eases effective case management.

Responses to the 2008 HHS study demonstrate this benefit of Wilson-Fish. Several respondents agreed that “the case management has ‘teeth.’”²⁵

This refers to a linkage between the cash assistance and refugee services -- the cash assistance is given to the refugee by the staff of the same agency that provides the employment and social services. As a result, the case managers have more oversight and control of the refugees’ participation in the various activities than if the cash assistance were provided by staff of a separate agency. For example, in some State-administered programs, a TANF refugee family receives their case management services from the refugee provider agency but must get their cash assistance payments from the state agency.²⁶

In addition, directing newly arrived clients to many different locations is cumbersome and often stressful. At KRM, almost all services are provided at a central office in downtown Lexington, which is accessible by public transportation. The few services for which clients must trek elsewhere include medical appointments and signing up for food stamps. KRM staff often accompany clients on their first couple trips to these new locations. Once on their own, ensuring that clients are punctual is another difficulty. Requiring clients to access a network of locations is a hugely inefficient process, and KRM is fortunate that through Wilson-Fish they provide most services in one location.

A final trend that emerged from the San Diego interviews is that Wilson-Fish “refugees were more likely to complain about getting pressure to go to work too soon.”²⁷ Finding

employment may be a more salient stressor for Wilson-Fish clients because the Wilson-Fish program has been rooted in economic purpose from its beginning. One of the three listed purposes of the Wilson-Fish program on the ORR website is to “increase refugee prospects for early employment and self-sufficiency.”²⁸ This founding language trickles through the bureaucracy and manifests in behavior that refugees notice and find stressful. In contrast, RESS clients say that education is more stressed and indeed had attained higher levels of education since arriving to the U.S. than their Wilson-Fish counterparts. As will be discussed, this reveals an area of possible improvement for Wilson-Fish programs.

The quantitative portion of the San Diego County study consists of a rigorous statistical analysis of measurable outcomes. The four areas studied are the proportion of Wilson-Fish and RESS clients who find employment during the eight-month eligibility period, the amount of time it takes to find employment after arrival, the number of days that clients rely upon financial support from the government, and the total amount of money received.

A sample of 800 refugees was drawn at random from the WF database of 1,181 for the January 1, 1992 – August 31, 1994, period. A separate sample of 800 other refugees was also drawn at random from the RESS database of 1,940 for the same period. Care was taken to match both samples on gender, region of origin, and age ... On average, the WF project achieved significantly higher rates of employment (12%) sooner after arrival (50 days), resulting in shorter dependency (92 days) and greater savings in cash assistance (\$395) [$p < 0.001$ for all four].²⁹

The Wilson-Fish program in San Diego County has significantly better performance than the state-run agency by these economic metrics focused on immediate self-sufficiency. Quantitative research has not been conducted on long-term refugee integration.

A similar quantitative analysis done on a nationwide scale is shown in the next section.

IV. FY 2014 Data Analysis

The ORR requires state-administered and Wilson-Fish programs to report six outcome measures on a trimester basis and annually by fiscal year.³⁰ These outcomes are each economic in nature, and are shown in the first six rows of the leftmost column of Table 1.

- Entered Employment refers to the percentage of the employment caseload (clients eligible for employment) who have found employment.
- Cash Assistance Terminations refers to the percentage of clients who have their federal welfare (RCA and TANF) terminated due to earnings.
- Cash Assistance Reductions refers to the percentage of clients who have their federal welfare reduced due to earnings. Reduction is a precursor to termination.
- Employment with Health Benefits refers to the percentage of clients who enter a full-time job that grants health benefits within the first six months of employment.
- Average Hourly Wage refers to the average starting wage for clients entering employment.

- 90-Day Retention Rate refers to the percentage of clients who maintain an employment opportunity for at least 90 days.

The bottom half of Table 1 shows several relevant statistics about the states. For each outcome measure and other detail, I show the average for Wilson-Fish states, the average for other states, and the p-value derived from a t-test to determine whether the difference between the means of the two categories is significant with 90% confidence.

For the six outcome measures, Wilson-Fish states fair better than other states in every measure except for average hourly wage, which is lower by three cents. However, the two groups are only meaningfully different in two categories, the percentage of clients who enter employment and the percentage of cash assistance terminations.

The data therefore suggests that Wilson-Fish states more effectively assist refugees in finding initial employment that allows them to become financially self-sufficient. To determine whether this difference can truly be accredited to the Wilson-Fish program, other possibilities can be considered or eliminated based on other potential differences between the two groups.

Wilson-Fish states assist a significantly smaller number of refugees, which could partly explain why their services are more effective. However, since voluntary agencies receive funding based on the number of clients they settle, fewer clients means smaller agencies. Knowing whether the staff to client ratio is higher in Wilson-Fish states would inform this discussion. An additional consideration is that each year local voluntary agencies submit an estimate of the number of refugees they can settle in the coming year to their national voluntary agency. For FY 2017, CWS and EMM urged KRM to raise its capacity for clients.³¹ However, KRM decided that the Lexington community's capacity is already being reached and maintained the estimate

they submitted for FY 2016.³² Therefore the lower number of clients resettling in Wilson-Fish states could be partially deliberate in an effort to assure that communities and voluntary agencies are not overly strained.

Table 1: Data from FY 2014. Health Benefits data from ORR's FY 2014 Annual Report to Congress, all other data from ORR Indicators for Refugee Resettlement Stakeholders.^{33, 34}

Outcome Measure	Average for Wilson-Fish States (n=12)	Average for Other States (n=38)	p-Value of Difference (significant with $\alpha=0.10$ are bold)
Entered Employment	63.3%	54.0%	p = 0.0063
Cash Assistance Terminations	61.0%	50.3%	p = 0.0841
Cash Assistance Reductions	19.8%	14.9%	p = 0.1968
Employment with Health Benefits	64.8%	63.3%	p = 0.4106
Average Hourly Wage	\$9.57	\$9.60	p = 0.4324
90-Day Retention Rate	82.2%	79.3%	p = 0.2318
Other Details			
Total Refugee Clients	1167.17	3284.89	p < 0.001
ORR Funding Received Per Client	\$6130.31	\$8344.18	p < 0.001
Median Monthly Cost of Housing	\$762.92	\$815.05	p = 0.1381
State Unemployment Rate	5.0%	5.3%	p = 0.2290
State Minimum Wage	\$7.95	\$7.90	p = 0.4110
Net Secondary Migration (immigrants minus emigrants)	-38.33	14.42	p = 0.0805
Total Secondary Migration	334	510	p = 0.0088

Wilson-Fish states receive significantly less ORR funding per client than other states. This can be partially explained by the higher frequency of Cash Assistance Terminations and Reductions in Wilson-Fish states: Clients are supported by federal funding for a shorter period of time and are therefore cheaper to resettle. The lower spending in Wilson-Fish states can also be partially attributed to the lower median cost of housing, though the small difference (about \$50 per client) is not statistically significant. For a federal government with budgetary problems, the cost-effective nature of Wilson-Fish should be noted.

There is no significant difference between general unemployment rates or minimum wages between Wilson-Fish states and other states. This knowledge helps rebut the possibility that Wilson-Fish states reach a higher employment rate because of better local economic conditions for entry-level workers.

Finally, Wilson-Fish states experience significantly less total secondary migration than other states, and lose clients rather than gain them. Secondary migration occurs when refugees move from their location of initial resettlement, often within the first weeks of arrival to the country. When refugees then settle in their preferred location, they request resettlement services from the voluntary agencies there. The national voluntary agencies try to reduce secondary migration as much as possible because it strains voluntary agencies and the system as a whole. Voluntary agencies who receive secondary migrants are strained most because secondary migrants “can unexpectedly increase the refugee population in a community, and communities that attract large numbers of secondary migrants may not have adequate, timely funding to provide resettlement services to the migrants who need them.”³⁵ Therefore, the higher rate of secondary migration to non-Wilson-Fish states could contribute to their less effective services. However, voluntary agencies meant to resettle refugees who end up leaving town are also

strained. Director Cobb explained in our interview that voluntary agencies prepare for clients' arrivals by spending money on housing, furniture, and basic needs.³⁶ When clients arrive and then leave, the preparations are not used. Director Cobb mentioned once purchasing a month's worth of rent for a family who left town, leaving the apartment empty.³⁷ Although money spent pre-arrival most often comes from the refugee's State Department Reception and Placement funds rather than the voluntary agency itself, at the very least time and focus have been wasted.

Although the lower number of clients and lower rates of secondary migration may provide a slight advantage to Wilson-Fish states, the higher rates of employment and cash assistance terminations are likely more attributable to the benefits of Wilson-Fish outlined in the literature review.

V. Wilson-Fish and Education

The ORR website states that "the WF program emphasizes early employment and economic self-sufficiency," and based on data from FY 2014 the program succeeds.³⁸ However, a tunnel vision focus on employment and financial self-sufficiency may neglect other factors of refugee integration. Education is the most notable opportunity cost of focusing on short horizon economic gain.

Educating refugees is a complex issue. Some clients arrive in the U.S. illiterate in their native language, while others hold advanced degrees. However, doctors, engineers, electricians, and others find extreme difficulty when trying to resume their previous occupations in the U.S. Because certification requirements and differences in how the job market functions in the U.S. as

opposed to overseas, even the most highly skilled refugees are almost always placed into entry level employment. Halpern writes that education is

an important predictor of economic status. Several studies found higher education to be associated with better economic status (Potocky-Tripodi, 2003; Potocky & McDonald, 1995; Potocky-Tripodi, 2001). However, Takeda (2000) found that among male refugees from Iraq, those with higher education had lower incomes. Although educated Iraqis tried to obtain jobs suited to their skills or education, this was rarely achieved due to a lack of English language proficiency and lack of proof of prior occupational skills, licenses or diplomas. Refugees who are less educated are willing to retain manual jobs for a long time, while educated refugees may fail to do so and have to depend on public assistance.³⁹

The insistence upon finding employment as soon as possible also rushes refugees into the first positions they can find. It is important to gain employment so that clients can become self-sufficient before their cash assistance expires, and early employment rates are often used as a metric for successful resettlement programs (as in my analysis of FY 2014 data). Wilson-Fish was expressly created to abet employment services with the aim of reducing aid dependency.

Voluntary agencies provide English training, cultural orientation, citizenship classes, and help enroll children in school. There is little focus on education for adults beyond what is necessary on a basic level.

There are several federal efforts to assist refugees who yearn for post-secondary education or training. For example, the Individual Development Account Program is run by the ORR and provides matched savings accounts to refugees trying to save money for a “home purchase, microenterprise capitalization, post-secondary education or training, and purchase of an automobile if necessary for employment or educational purposes. ... Grantees provide matches of up to \$1 for every \$1 deposited by a refugee in a savings account. The total match amount provided may not exceed \$2,000 for individuals or \$4,000 for households.”⁴⁰ There are also several private fellowships and grants for refugees seeking higher education, but overall it is very difficult for refugees to find the opportunity. The federal government should do much more to ease the financial constraints on refugees seeking education. In the realm of Wilson-Fish, changes in language and focus can begin to improve the long-term prospects for refugees.

For a 2016 report, Blessing Enekwe interviewed voluntary agency staff and refugee clients in Massachusetts, a category two Wilson-Fish state, and Maryland. She writes that “several practitioners made note of the lack of attention focused on formal education, particularly adult education and higher education;” further, she specifies that “the practitioner’s focus on academic education is limited in Massachusetts.”⁴¹ Maryland, with a unique public-private partnership program rather than Wilson-Fish, still struggled to educate clients but appeared to be making more of an attempt than the agencies in Massachusetts.

In other Wilson-Fish programs such as KRM, almost all attention to progress in the first eight months of arrival is centered on employment. Clients learn that finding a job is the key to self-sufficiency, and employment becomes their primary goal and focus. As mentioned, this focus helps Wilson-Fish clients succeed in reaching self-sufficiency.

However, clients may be more successful in the years following arrival if a long-term plan is discussed within the first eight months when still under primary case management by the voluntary agency. Staff at the voluntary agency could inform clients of resources such as the Individual Development Account Program and share stories of former clients who worked hard for years and eventually found the opportunity to get professional training or higher education.

Wilson-Fish idealizes self-sufficiency, but simply surviving apart from government aid does not fulfill the high potential of refugees to succeed in the U.S. An emphasis on integration should immediately follow self-sufficiency; the program should not be satisfied when clients are simply financially independent. If the program acknowledges from the beginning that goals beyond entry-level employment exist, clients will be prepared to work toward integration.

To add a focus on long-term success achieved through education and training, the ORR should alter the statement of purpose of Wilson-Fish to include language involving integration rather than stopping at self-sufficiency. The application for new Wilson-Fish programs should be updated to demand plans for assisting refugees to reach aspirations beyond self-sufficiency. Most importantly, the Wilson-Fish program guidelines should be altered to include a focus on success beyond the first eight months of resettlement. The FY 2015-2016 Wilson-Fish Program Guidelines written by the ORR had not a single mention of “education” aside from the recommendation to ask clients about their education level during the initial intake questioning.⁴² “Integration” is mentioned only once, as an objective of the Intensive Case Management guidelines reserved for especially challenging cases. Integration into communities should be a broad, defining focus for all clients.

VI. Conclusion

Evidence from the literature suggests that resettlement programs administered through Wilson-Fish are flexible and allow for local innovation, are more accessible to clients, foster intimate personal connections between clients, staff, and bureaucrats, and have a heightened focus on early employment and self-sufficiency. These improvements have a tangible effect: Data analysis comparing Wilson-Fish outcomes with other program outcomes nationwide shows that Wilson-Fish programs have higher rates of employment and cash assistance termination.

A potential problem with Wilson-Fish's focus on early employment is that long term plans such as those involving education can be neglected. Discussions of life beyond self-sufficiency are important so that refugees can attain full integration. To increase efforts toward integration, I recommend in section VI that the ORR change its statement of purpose, application requirements, and program guidelines.

Texas, Kansas, New Jersey, and Maine are each currently working toward adopting category one Wilson-Fish programs because their states decided to withdraw government support from resettlement. Although these states are withdrawing with the expressed intent to stifle refugee resettlement, the transition to Wilson-Fish will likely improve resettlement in their states. In fact, due to the noted benefits of Wilson-Fish I recommend that other states follow their lead in transitioning to category one or two Wilson-Fish programs. For states that wish to stay involved, Massachusetts, Colorado, and Vermont have demonstrated that category two Wilson-Fish programs can be very successful.

VII. Appendix – FY 2014 Data^{30,31}

State	Total ORR Clients	Total ORR Funding	ORR Funding per Client	Median Monthly Housing Cost	Ref. Employment Rate	Unemployment Rate (General Pop.)	Average Wage for Refugees	State Min. Wage	90-Day Retention Rate
ARIZONA	3890	\$ 20,526,474	\$ 5,277	\$ 859	57%	6.2%	\$ 8.50	\$ 8.05	85%
ARKANSAS	26	\$ 92,388	\$ 3,553	\$ 606	43%	5.6%	\$ 9.55	\$ 7.50	92%
CALIFORNIA	18279	\$ 47,809,866	\$ 2,616	\$ 1,155	31%	6.5%	\$ 10.07	\$ 9.00	93%
CONNECTICUT	744	\$ 2,710,558	\$ 3,643	\$ 1,006	69%	6.4%	\$ 10.34	\$ 9.15	75%
DELAWARE	37	\$ 113,658	\$ 3,072	\$ 949	89%	4.6%	\$ 9.20	\$ 7.75	80%
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	330	\$ 3,753,498	\$ 11,374	\$ 1,059	51%	7.7%	\$ 10.62	\$ 9.50	96%
FLORIDA	31207	\$ 141,152,814	\$ 4,523	\$ 952	38%	5.7%	\$ 8.64	\$ 8.05	65%
GEORGIA	3078	\$ 14,239,068	\$ 4,626	\$ 800	35%	6.3%	\$ 8.90	\$ 7.25	88%
HAWAII	110	\$ 219,790	\$ 1,998	\$ 1,293	35%	4.1%	\$ 7.31	\$ 7.75	83%
ILLINOIS	3284	\$ 12,548,953	\$ 3,821	\$ 828	50%	6.0%	\$ 10.86	\$ 8.25	85%
INDIANA	1736	\$ 7,557,054	\$ 4,353	\$ 687	69%	5.8%	\$ 9.69	\$ 7.25	77%
IOWA	746	\$ 3,114,719	\$ 4,175	\$ 611	75%	4.0%	\$ 9.46	\$ 7.25	95%
KANSAS	545	\$ 2,028,707	\$ 3,722	\$ 671	58%	4.2%	\$ 11.23	\$ 7.25	82%
MAINE	541	\$ 2,419,478	\$ 4,472	\$ 722	20%	4.8%	\$ 9.41	\$ 7.50	76%
MARYLAND	2419	\$ 18,271,606	\$ 7,553	\$ 1,108	73%	5.4%	\$ 10.07	\$ 8.00	85%
MICHIGAN	4390	\$ 24,573,107	\$ 5,598	\$ 716	47%	5.6%	\$ 8.86	\$ 8.15	79%
MINNESOTA	2362	\$ 8,880,466	\$ 3,760	\$ 757	62%	3.7%	\$ 9.69	\$ 8.00	79%
MISSISSIPPI	20	\$ 1,280,000	\$ 64,000	\$ 644	25%	6.8%	\$ 8.95	\$ 7.25	80%
MISSOURI	1599	\$ 6,418,950	\$ 4,014	\$ 668	54%	5.6%	\$ 9.06	\$ 7.65	76%
MONTANA	3	\$ 275,000	\$ 91,667	\$ 627	67%	4.1%	\$ 9.50	\$ 8.05	75%
NEBRASKA	1253	\$ 5,072,232	\$ 4,048	\$ 644	55%	2.6%	\$ 9.60	\$ 8.00	91%
NEW HAMPSHIRE	363	\$ 2,549,997	\$ 7,025	\$ 918	64%	3.9%	\$ 9.69	\$ 7.25	70%
NEW JERSEY	1608	\$ 3,600,788	\$ 2,239	\$ 1,108	29%	6.5%	\$ 11.21	\$ 8.38	84%
NEW MEXICO	327	\$ 2,408,461	\$ 7,365	\$ 680	21%	6.1%	\$ 8.69	\$ 7.50	92%
NEW YORK	11938	\$ 29,422,396	\$ 2,465	\$ 984	71%	5.7%	\$ 11.00	\$ 8.75	81%
NORTH CAROLINA	2898	\$ 10,428,653	\$ 3,599	\$ 720	88%	5.4%	\$ 8.77	\$ 7.25	92%
OHIO	3116	\$ 14,731,443	\$ 4,728	\$ 670	32%	5.1%	\$ 9.46	\$ 8.10	36%
OKLAHOMA	457	\$ 1,441,230	\$ 3,154	\$ 636	77%	3.9%	\$ 10.23	\$ 7.25	93%
OREGON	1410	\$ 4,862,819	\$ 3,449	\$ 819	69%	5.4%	\$ 9.54	\$ 9.25	68%
PENNSYLVANIA	3423	\$ 20,775,512	\$ 6,069	\$ 738	61%	5.3%	\$ 9.29	\$ 7.25	89%
RHODE ISLAND	221	\$ 640,368	\$ 2,898	\$ 890	39%	6.3%	\$ 9.65	\$ 9.00	90%
SOUTH CAROLINA	185	\$ 585,585	\$ 3,165	\$ 706	20%	6.7%	\$ 10.00	\$ 7.25	71%
TEXAS	12787	\$ 59,979,204	\$ 4,691	\$ 788	46%	4.2%	\$ 9.24	\$ 7.25	83%
UTAH	1246	\$ 9,424,766	\$ 7,564	\$ 793	61%	3.4%	\$ 9.02	\$ 7.25	80%
VIRGINIA	3652	\$ 14,715,934	\$ 4,030	\$ 989	82%	4.8%	\$ 9.79	\$ 7.25	71%
WASHINGTON	3328	\$ 15,362,798	\$ 4,616	\$ 911	32%	5.9%	\$ 10.29	\$ 9.47	71%
WEST VIRGINIA	51	\$ 142,406	\$ 2,792	\$ 552	100%	6.6%	\$ 9.66	\$ 8.00	14%
WISCONSIN	1217	\$ 6,529,290	\$ 5,365	\$ 708	57%	4.6%	\$ 9.66	\$ 7.25	91%
ALABAMA	153	\$ 747,183	\$ 4,884	\$ 657	84%	5.7%	\$ 8.80	\$ 7.25	97%
ALASKA	174	\$ 1,412,987	\$ 8,121	\$ 1,007	46%	6.5%	\$ 9.57	\$ 8.75	95%
COLORADO	2119	\$ 14,434,037	\$ 6,812	\$ 851	82%	4.2%	\$ 10.41	\$ 8.23	86%
IDAHO	1051	\$ 6,851,675	\$ 6,519	\$ 694	59%	3.8%	\$ 8.66	\$ 7.25	88%
KENTUCKY	2740	\$ 11,886,500	\$ 4,338	\$ 613	53%	5.1%	\$ 9.42	\$ 7.25	85%
LOUISIANA	380	\$ 1,447,876	\$ 3,810	\$ 715	59%	6.6%	\$ 8.96	\$ 7.25	91%
MASSACHUSETTS	2414	\$ 20,465,093	\$ 8,478	\$ 988	74%	4.8%	\$ 10.21	\$ 9.00	85%
NEVADA	1585	\$ 7,832,730	\$ 4,942	\$ 993	56%	7.1%	\$ 10.38	\$ 8.25	54%
NORTH DAKOTA	610	\$ 3,564,504	\$ 5,843	\$ 564	64%	3.1%	\$ 9.50	\$ 7.25	96%
SOUTH DAKOTA	540	\$ 2,965,543	\$ 5,492	\$ 562	47%	3.5%	\$ 9.87	\$ 8.50	68%
TENNESSEE	1904	\$ 11,807,859	\$ 6,202	\$ 682	59%	6.3%	\$ 9.06	\$ 7.25	64%
VERMONT	336	\$ 2,729,680	\$ 8,124	\$ 829	76%	3.8%	\$ 10.01	\$ 9.15	77%
Average	2776.64	\$ 12,136,114	\$ 7,813	\$ 803	56.2%	5.2%	\$ 9.59	\$ 7.91	80.0%
Standard Deviation	5329.96	\$ 22,000,386	\$ 14,825	\$ 175	19.4%	1.2%	\$ 0.75	\$ 0.72	15.0%
Average for Wilson-Fish States	1167.17	\$ 7,178,806	\$ 6,130	\$ 763	63.3%	5.0%	\$ 9.57	\$ 7.95	82.2%
Average for Other States	3284.89	\$ 13,701,580	\$ 8,344	\$ 815	54.0%	5.3%	\$ 9.60	\$ 7.90	79.3%
Standard Deviation of WF Average	938.79	\$ 6,262,097	\$ 1,541	\$ 166	12.9%	1.4%	\$ 0.61	\$ 0.77	13.7%
p-Values	< 0.001		< 0.001	\$ 0	0.00625	0.22895	\$ 0.43	\$ 0.41	0.23178

State	Cash Assistance Terminations	Cash Assistance Reductions	Ref. Employment with Health Benefits	Net Secondary Migration	Secondary Migration Into State	Secondary Migration Out of State	Total Secondary Migrants	Wilson-Fish
ARIZONA	75%	8%	56%	-568	164	732	896	no
ARKANSAS	31%	0%	100%	-4	0	4	4	no
CALIFORNIA	16%	25%	21%	-119	515	634	1149	no
CONNECTICUT	15%	0%	67%	-196	18	214	232	no
DELAWARE	0%	0%	86%	7	7	0	7	no
D.C.	13%	15%	65%	9	0	9	9	no
FLORIDA	96%	0%	49%	746	1367	621	1988	no
GEORGIA	80%	0%	77%	-417	174	591	765	no
HAWAII	0%	100%	0%	-1	0	1	1	no
ILLINOIS	58%	42%	92%	-144	204	348	552	no
INDIANA	31%	6%	86%	72	225	153	378	no
IOWA	100%	0%	87%	128	172	44	216	no
KANSAS	66%	19%	74%	106	196	90	286	no
MAINE	41%	7%	36%	67	154	87	241	no
MARYLAND	25%	0%	73%	-148	65	213	278	no
MICHIGAN	50%	41%	37%	-200	197	397	594	no
MINNESOTA	34%	25%	27%	3265	3387	122	3509	no
MISSISSIPPI	100%	0%	33%	-6	0	6	6	no
MISSOURI	65%	15%	81%	-220	233	453	686	no
MONTANA	0%	0%	100%	0	0	0	0	no
NEBRASKA	81%	2%	96%	44	109	65	174	no
NEW HAMPSHIRE	74%	26%	70%	-5	23	28	51	no
NEW JERSEY	42%	31%	40%	-122	12	134	146	no
NEW MEXICO	43%	22%	93%	-131	3	134	137	no
NEW YORK	1%	62%	25%	-496	161	657	818	no
NORTH CAROLINA	89%	11%	90%	-319	159	478	637	no
OHIO	49%	39%	32%	-238	47	285	332	no
OKLAHOMA	100%	0%	96%	298	310	12	322	no
OREGON	90%	10%	72%	-63	140	203	343	no
PENNSYLVANIA	84%	6%	78%	-382	83	465	548	no
RHODE ISLAND	59%	12%	80%	-34	0	34	34	no
SOUTH CAROLINA	56%	11%	44%	20	11	31	42	no
TEXAS	4%	0%	87%	-362	884	1246	2130	no
UTAH	36%	0%	46%	-122	50	172	222	no
VIRGINIA	62%	0%	70%	-214	56	270	326	no
WASHINGTON	52%	0%	41%	98	465	367	832	no
WEST VIRGINIA	4%	21%	27%	1	1	0	1	no
WISCONSIN	89%	9%	70%	198	351	153	504	no
ALABAMA	11%	59%	57%	-83	8	91	99	yes
ALASKA	38%	55%	47%	-9	12	21	33	yes
COLORADO	86%	14%	77%	36	300	264	564	yes - C2
IDAHO	56%	19%	34%	-173	50	223	273	yes
KENTUCKY	75%	10%	78%	18	379	361	740	yes
LOUISIANA	100%	0%	17%	-57	20	77	97	yes
MASSACHUSETTS	59%	31%	89%	-387	120	507	627	yes - C2
NEVADA	32%	3%	70%	96	339	243	582	yes
NORTH DAKOTA	61%	7%	99%	55	120	65	185	yes
SOUTH DAKOTA	75%	12%	73%	25	118	93	211	yes
TENNESSEE	43%	27%	71%	9	276	267	543	yes
VERMONT	96%	0%	65%	10	32	22	54	yes - C2
Average	52.9%	16.0%	63.6%	1.76	234.34	233.74	468.08	
Standard Deviation	31.4%	20.4%	25.5%	516.23	514.79	251.21	624.30	
Average for Wilson-Fish	61.0%	19.8%	64.8%	-38.33	147.83	186.17	334.00	
Average for Other State:	50.3%	14.9%	63.3%	14.42	261.66	248.76	510.42	
Standard Deviation of W	26.9%	19.9%	23.0%	130.37	137.95	150.53	257.65	
p-Values	0.084117	0.1968	0.4106	0.0805			0.00884	

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