

## IRAQI REFUGEES: THRIVE IN AMERICA

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**Host of National Conference Call:** International Rescue Committee

**Moderator:** Kathleen Newland, Board of Directors, IRC and Commission, IRC Commission on Iraqi Refugees

**Presenter:** Bob Carey, Vice President for Resettlement and Migration Policy, IRC

**Presenter:** Kate Reid, Resettlement Program Manager, IRC-Phoenix

**Respondent during Q & A:** Elissa Mittman, National Immigration Director, IRC

**Respondent during Q & A:** Danya Pastuszek, Program Officer, Project for Strengthening Organizations Assisting Refugees (SOAR), IRC

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### Glossary:

- **DoS:** Department of State
- **MAA:** Mutual Assistance Association (A non-profit organization made up of at least 51% refugees or former refugees that provides services to incoming refugees)
- **ORR:** Office of Refugee Resettlement, Department of Health and Human Services
- **R & P:** Reception and Placement (A partnership between the US government and voluntary resettlement agencies. US government gives grants to each refugee and sponsoring voluntary resettlement contributes cash and other resources. The focus is the first 30-90 days a refugee is in America and includes areas like housing, essential furnishings, food, clothing, community orientation and referral to other social and employment services.)
- **SIV:** Special Immigrant Visa (The Iraqi SIV program is “separate and distinct” from the regular refugee resettlement program and is for Iraqis who worked for the US government or military in Iraq for at least a year on or after March 20, 2003, and whose lives became at risk because of that service. Most Iraqi SIVs are eligible for the same benefits and services as refugees who come through the resettlement program.)
- **VITA:** Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (From the Internal Revenue Service, VITA offers free tax help to people whose incomes are \$40,000 or less. Volunteers sponsored by various organizations receive training to prepare basic tax returns in communities across the country. VITA sites are located at some voluntary resettlement agencies and are also found at community and neighborhood centers, libraries, schools, shopping malls and other convenient locations)
- **VOLAG:** Voluntary agency refers to private humanitarian agencies that work under cooperative agreements with the US State Department to provide services for refugees.

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**Operator:** Good day, everyone, and welcome to the International Rescue Committee Iraqi Refugees Thrive in America conference call.

Today’s conference is being recorded.

At this time, I would like to turn the call over to your host, Ms. Kathleen Newland. Please go ahead, ma’am.

**Kathleen Newland:** Thank you very much. And I'd like to welcome everyone on the call, and thank you very much for the work that you're doing to help Iraqi refugees who are settling in the United States.

I know there are professionals, volunteers, members of the communities that are welcoming Iraqi refugees among you. And we very much applaud and appreciate your efforts to help them establish new lives.

My name is Kathleen Newland, as the operator said. I'm a member of the board of directors of the International Rescue Committee. In my day job I'm a founder and a director of the Migration Policy Institute here in Washington.

I was a member of the IRC's recent Commission on Iraqi Refugees, and had the opportunity to travel to the region to talk with people in Syria and Jordan, many of whom are hoping to be resettled. You can see the report of the IRC Commission on Iraqi Refugees on the IRC Web site, which is [www.theirc.org/iraq](http://www.theirc.org/iraq), for our report.

I've been working on refugees for about 30 years now, since the time of the Indochinese boat people. And we know, on the basis of this long experience, that every refugee group is unique, but there are some commonalities in the experience of resettlement that have allowed organizations like the IRC to learn a lot of lessons that we're able to apply with new resettlement groups like the Iraqis.

This call – the purpose of this call is to help strengthen the efforts of people like you who are helping Iraqi refugees to help themselves after they've arrived in the U.S. We have about 120 people signed up for this call from, I think it was 24 states at last count. So, I'm looking forward to a wide-ranging conversation.

One thing we won't be able to do on this call is to address specific cases of individuals or families. And, of course, we can't speak on behalf of other agencies or the U.S. government. We're just giving you an IRC view of the issues that we'll be discussing.

The call format is going to be – it's going to go like this. We're going to have very brief presentations from two IRC staff members, and then a lot of time for questions and discussion with you, the callers.

As the operator noted, this call is being recorded. The reason for this is just that we want this call to be a useful tool for other volunteers and for other members of the IRC staff, and other organizations, resettlement agencies, national and local government agencies – and the Congress – so that we can all better help Iraqi refugees to help themselves in America.

Given that it's being recorded, I want to let you know it's helpful for us if you identify yourself when you're asking a question. But if you don't feel comfortable doing that, please don't feel that you have to identify yourself. You're perfectly free to remain anonymous, if you want to.

Now, for our first speaker, I'd like to introduce Bob Carey, who is the IRC's Vice President for Resettlement and Migration Policy. He's going to be our first presenter – a man with long experience of the resettlement process. And I'd like to ask Bob to introduce himself to you.

**Bob Carey:** Thank you very much, Kathleen. And thank you for joining us today.

I'd first like to welcome all of the callers, and thank you for all that you are doing to support Iraqi and other refugees. I know from having seen some of the information, it's a very diverse group of participants. But we share a common purpose and cause, which is to assist refugees in a coherent, respectful and compassionate manner, whether it's in the provision of direct services or advocacy you know with Congress, the administration, community groups and when asked to by the media on their behalf.

So, given the limited time, I expect that I'll only scratch the surface of some of these issues, and can either speak in more detail later in the Q&A, or we can give resources for follow-up after the call.

And as Kathleen mentioned, our purpose is really to provide a broad overview in response to some of the questions we are hearing from a variety of sources. And it's clear that there is a lot of misinformation out about some aspects of the refugee program and the actors in it.

So, while we are not speaking on behalf of our colleague agencies, we're hoping that we can – or organizations – we hope that we can – we all share the same goal of advancing the work.

So, I've been working with refugees for 27 years, 23 of those at IRC. And as well as many of you, I've worked with both private sector and government, with donors, non-governmental and governmental agencies, to support, strengthen and improve the U.S. refugee resettlement system.

I have been in the region on numerous delegations, including the IRC delegation, which Kathleen Newland participated in, and have had the benefit of traveling across the U.S. to many of the 24 locations where IRC does resettlement, and spent time there with Iraqi refugees talking about their experience, and with the people who are working to assist them.

What is clear is that, throughout the system, whether it's in processing or resettlement, that everyone is operating under considerable resource constraints, and are endeavoring to provide services in a compassionate manner, but are limited in the scope of the services they can provide.

I wanted to also just mention, I am the chair of the Refugee Council USA, which is a coalition of 23 non-governmental organizations that help protect refugees through both resettlement assistance and advocacy. But I do not claim to be talking on behalf of all of those agencies here today.

I just wanted to touch on some of the issues. And I apologize if this is repetitive for some of you who are working in different aspects of the field.

But the purpose of the refugee resettlement system in the U.S. is to support the rapid integration and self-sufficiency of refugees.

And it is a system that, by and large, has worked well over time. The U.S. has resettled close to 2.5 million refugees since the founding of the program as we know it now in 1980. And they've included large numbers of religious minorities from the Soviet Union, Vietnam, the Sudan, Iran, Burma, Bhutan. And it has given people an opportunity to start new lives.

And it is a program that has great bipartisan support in the Congress, and domestic support. And I believe this is in large part because of the vital role that civil society you know community groups and volunteers play in the implementation of the program, the service to refugees and the U.S. tradition of welcoming people who are fleeing persecution to the U.S.

I think it is – the resettlement environment in which we are now operating I think bears some mention, because the overlay of this is really the economic crisis that the U.S. is confronting, as well as the fact that the benefits and assistance provided to refugees, either at the local level or through the agencies, or through the benefit system in the different states has really been flat for many, many years.

And I think what we've seen is the Iraqi refugees arriving in large numbers, largely in the fourth quarter of the year, has really put into sharp relief some of the deficiencies or shortcomings in the program. And it's something that we are all working individually and collectively to advocate for changes in.

But I think it's also important to understand what the mandate of resettlement agencies is, and the resource limitations they have. And my colleague, (Kate Reid), will go into more detail about this later.

But the – and I think one of the challenges we have is the refugees understandably come in with expectations of a life in the United States which takes a considerable period of time to reestablish. But I think there's a lot of work that's focused on employment.

But I think it's also important to understand that in the U.S. there are 50 states, and there are nine agencies assisting refugees. And while they have a basic standard, they all do things somewhat differently, in part because of the environment in which they're working.

But assisting refugees in obtaining employment is a key ingredient of this, and the focus of the U.S. program has long been assisting people in becoming self-sufficient as quickly as possible. And usually, because of the limited resources, it's in an entry level job. It's assisting people to become self-sufficient as quickly as possible, and it doesn't necessarily mean in the short term in their professional career that's comparable to what they enjoyed before they came here, because that often is not possible in the very short term.

Often, agencies are referring to outside community groups to provide that employment service. Sometimes they provide it in-house.

Another part of the program that they deliver is orientation to the new community and to life in the United States, initial housing. But really, under the State Department agreement, that's often limited to just the first month, unless additional funds are provided, either through Health and Human Services or local, privately raised funding.

Also, assisting refugees in registering for benefits, such as Social Security, or when they are in need of it, public assistance benefits.

We'd like to encourage people as we go through this to work with us and with local community groups, to find out what those resources are and tap into them, whether it's the local voluntary agencies or the state administered programs, because I think what our history has shown is that a lot of confusion is created if people on the local level are not working in concert and in agreement in how to provide those services. And I know that that can be confusing, both to the different organizations trying to provide support, as well as to the Iraqi refugees who are trying to adapt to life in the U.S., which we know is one of the most challenging experiences of theirs or anyone else's lives.

And we do want to work with you to give information that will help people to avoid reinventing the wheel or doing duplicative services.

And we will like to you know point out other ways that people can help, whether it's through advocacy at the local level on behalf of specific legislative reforms, to look at changing the refugee resettlement system, to increase the period of support or volunteering at the local level.

I would like to point out as well that we are, I think, very much aware that the system as it exists now is in need of reform. It really does need to change. The level of support provided to refugees is not adequate, and it should be more in depth. It should be tailored to the specific needs of Iraqis or other populations, which are often quite different.

And it should have services targeted to the needs of the most vulnerable, the people who are arriving with medical needs, in particular, which we know within the Iraqi population is a significant portion of people.

Also, just mentioning as well that one of the overlays that we've seen, and the constraints in the program in the most recent year has been that many of the refugees arrived in the last months of the fiscal year.

The good news is that they did arrive, and the U.S. was able to admit roughly 13,000 refugees in ((inaudible)), the current fiscal year that just ended. The challenges that many of those people arrived in the last two months, which meant that the services were not perhaps at the level or with the detail that anyone would have wanted to see, because, I think, just any of the resources at the local level, whether they're the medical systems, the schools or the resettlement agencies were very much strained by the number of people who arrived in such a short period of time.

But without going into all detail, which I think will best in response to questions, I'd like to just hand off to my colleague, Kate Reid, who will fill in some of the details about how these issues are working, or the challenges that she is seeing in the Arizona resettlement context, and suggest some practical ways that we can all help Iraqi refugees – Kate.

**Kate Reid:** Great. Thanks, Bob.

I just wanted to reiterate the facts that we have for everybody who is involved in this, because, due to limited resources, it really does help us to have people in the community that are willing to reach out and help people with the resettlement process.

So, thank you for that.

I am the resettlement program manager here in the Phoenix office. We also have an office in Tucson, which is run by someone different. And it's an IRC office, of course, but a different program manager there.

And just – you know people talked a little bit about their backgrounds. I have over 10 years experience working with refugees and IDPs – those are displaced people in the overseas context – in different countries with different organizations.

And so, this has allowed me to sort of see the situation from two sides – from the side of the refugees overseas, and also the side of it you know coming to the U.S. and being resettled.

To give you a scope of what we've been dealing with in the past year, we have resettled about 740 refugees – a little over 740 – and 257 Iraqi refugees within that mix. That's the largest number of Iraqi refugees that we have resettled over the course of the years. Last year it was much lower. It was about 47 people.

As Bob pointed out, these people have come at a time when the U.S. is experiencing some severe economic problems. So, that has certainly affected the resettlement process for them and for us. And it has made it – it has made it more difficult.

The good thing is that they've gotten here, and they're in the country. But then, they were faced with some difficulties in finding employment.

I just want to give you an idea of how our office works. I oversee caseworkers, who do everything from meeting people at the airport, to setting up their apartments, bringing them to their apartments, getting them hooked into their medical benefits and food stamps and their Social Security, enrolling their children in school, doing follow-up medical appointments, and just dealing with any other issue that might come up, because, obviously, we have people who come with some medical problems that are more severe.

We have people come with disabilities – sometimes children, too, that need to be put into proper schools for that, or given the proper exams for that.

And in some cases – not necessarily with the Iraqi refugee community – but we deal with domestic issues as time goes on, too, that our caseworkers have to be pulled into, domestic violence issues. Or sometimes there are issues of drugs and alcohol in other populations.

So, the caseworkers have an incredibly large amount of things to deal with. And there are limited resources for them to deal with that.

On top of that, we have an in-house employment program. And these are employment coordinators that meet with people as they come in, and work with them to try and get them into a job as soon as possible.

And again, as Bob mentioned, often these are very entry-level jobs. So, it can be difficult for people coming over who have good English, or who have very strong skills in certain areas, to learn that when they come here, they might have to take an entry-level job. And that's something that we often have to work with people on to accept.

It is difficult for some employers, if someone, even if they do speak good English and have good skills, if they don't have the experience with a job in the United States on their resume, for some employers it's a difficulty. It's a roadblock for them.

Then the other issue, of course, back to the economic crisis, we're starting to see people applying for these jobs, and showing up for the jobs that refugees mostly would apply for, who are not refugees, who speak very good English and who are American, U.S. citizens. And so, therefore, the competition has increased for some jobs that previously we would have – we would have been able to put refugees into.

The other issue in Arizona, of course, is we are a state that deals a lot with tourism in the winter months. And because of the economy, that has slowed down. And it was in the service sectors that we were often able to get jobs for refugees. So, as the hotels slow down, the jobs in those sectors also slow down.

You know just to kind of back up a little bit and talk about what we do provide when refugees come, we are required to provide a month's rental assistance to refugees. We actually in our office provide a month-and-a-half to try and get people more on their feet.

We do have some special programs that unfortunately don't cover everybody. But there are different grant programs that come in now and then, that are able to cover people a little bit longer, based on certain criteria.

And we find it sometimes difficult, because I think the perception is overseas, before people come here, if they hear about these programs, that there's an understanding that everybody gets onto these programs. And that's not always the case. They are – they have specific criteria, and they do run out at a certain point, so we can't necessarily get everybody onto those programs.

Some of the other issues that we're dealing with is the fact that we are also serving refugees for up to five years. So, our focus is new arrivals, and trying to get new arrivals on their feet. But we're also working with people who might come back to us two years into their life here, who may still have problems with employment, who may still be experiencing problems with some of their documents.

So, we are also serving those people, too, so that can increase the caseload for the caseworkers as well, as well as the employment coordinators.

And I think that pretty much covers what we're dealing with. I'd like to talk a little bit about how you might be able to help as volunteers.

Again, we value volunteers so much, and also family members that are here when Iraqi refugees come. We sometimes have Iraqi refugees come and they have families here, who work, in a sense, as volunteers. They're assisting them.

But it's very, very helpful to have volunteers, to help clients try and understand the system. And that might mean working with us a little bit to understand how we implement the program, what our constraints are, and in what way it would be best for a refugee to adjust here in the United States.

It could be something as simple as helping them understand the importance of taking a first job that is offered, in order to help them get income and start establishing a work history in the United States.

Also, making connections within the community that could lead to higher levels of employment in the future. That's very, very helpful, because we, the caseworkers that we have are working on specific cases, and trying to get very specific things done within a timeline. And they can't always be out there looking for additional contacts, once a person has had their initial job.

Just assisting clients to adjust to the day-to-day life in the U.S. is incredibly important, as well. Helping them ride the bus, helping them do shopping. Helping them to become comfortable and confident in a new city, especially where they're not speaking the language very well.

Also, assisting in transporting clients to different appointments. We, in the beginning, our caseworkers, of course, are transporting people back and forth to the different appointments. But as time goes on and other new arrivals come in, we expect that the refugees start to learn the bus system and become more self-sufficient in getting themselves to their appointments. And that's very helpful to have volunteers out there to help with that.

Just navigating basic bureaucratic systems, such as schools, government offices, is also helpful. Assisting them in improving upon their English skills.

And I think just, also helping them see that there are some positive things outside of what they're going through when they first arrive.

So, for instance, taking them out to parks, letting them see that there's places that they can go that have beauty, and that might make them feel more positive.

And I think one of the most important things that you can stress is that the situation is really temporary. This is a situation that all refugees come into – and they've made it out. And it is difficult in the beginning, but they've made it out.

In fact, all of our caseworkers and employment coordinators, except one, in our office, are former refugees. And that's very helpful for us, because they're able to say to our clients you know "I've had this experience, and I've gone through this."

So, I think having volunteers also work with our clients on that is very helpful, as well.

So, that's kind of from my end. And from you know what it looks like in a state or city perspective.

And I'd like to hand it back to Kathleen for questions.

**Kathleen Newland:** OK. Thank you very much, Kate and Bob, for giving us that overview.

We're now going to open up for your questions, comments and suggestions. We will take one caller at a time. And as I said, it's helpful if you identify yourself. But if you don't feel comfortable doing that, it's not necessary.

I would like to ask you to please be as brief as you can in asking your question or making your comment, so that we can get as many issues on the table as possible today.

Later, if you want to ask another question, or make another comment or suggestion, please just sort of get in the line again, and we'll get to as many callers as we can.

If we don't have time to get to everyone on this call who would like to ask a question or make a comment, I'll leave you with a telephone number and an e-mail, so that you can be in contact after this call.

If, when you're asking your question or making your comment, if you'd like to address it to a specific IRC staffer on the call, please say the name of the staffer.

I want to point out that we have, in addition to Kate and Bob, we have two other IRC staff people on the call to answer your questions. Elissa Mittman is IRC's director of national immigration. And Danya Pastuszek is program officer at the program for Strengthening Organizations Assisting Refugees. That's the SOAR Project.

So, we are ready to take your questions and comments.

**Operator:** Thank you. To ask a question, please press star one on your telephone keypad at this time.

If you are on a speakerphone, please make sure that your mute function is turned off to allow your signal to reach our equipment.

We will take as many questions as time permits. A voice prompt on your phone line will indicate when your line is open to ask your question. However, if you do not wish to give your name, you are not required to do so.

Once again, please press star one for questions at this time. We'll pause for just a moment to give everyone the opportunity to signal.

We'll go to our first question.

**Kathleen Newland:** Thank you, caller. Please go ahead.

**Anne:** Hi. My name's Anne. I'm from the Iraqi Job Network. I'm just wondering, in terms of the employment issue, because I think that is the key at getting integrated. That's what our organization is trying to help with.

Do the ((inaudible)) have reports or ways that we can find out what the types of jobs are in various markets, so we can help advise people before they come here?

**Kathleen Newland:** You want me to take that?

**Bob Carey:** Certainly.

**Kate Reid:** OK. I think that that's something that we could work with you on. I mean, we are looking – we have – we're starting to branch out and look at more employers, but there are very specific employers that we have been working with over the years here in Arizona.

I don't know – I really don't know what the situation is in other states, so I can't say that. But I think that it's something that we could discuss with you. We don't have a report that we put out specifically, but I think it might be something that we could discuss with you, in terms of what types of jobs are available here, and what we're mostly looking at for people coming in. And that would be all refugees, not just Iraqis.

**Bob Carey:** Yes, if I may, I think that's an important point to keep in mind.

I think that for most organizations, at least the resettlement agencies, who are doing job placement, they are under pretty significant time constraints to get as many people in jobs as quickly as possible, so that they can pay their own rents and cover their expenses by the time that the limited support ends. And so, that's one of the primary goals.

But in addition to working with Iraqis, IRC – and, I'm sure, our colleague agencies – are also, for instance, working with many Burundians or Burmese, who have been in refugee camps for often their entire lives, or 10 years or more. Some of have limited English, some low literacy.

But we're working concurrently with Iraqis and these other populations and trying to place as many people in jobs as possible.

In an ideal world, I think there would be a more tailored employment system. And I think – we are advocating that that certainly be a part of an expanded refugee assistance and resettlement program in the future.

But I think right now, it's important to recognize that most agencies are trying to place people into employment where they can place a number of employees with one organization – so, often in the service industry, in hotels, manufacturing and other sectors where there's a real demand to bring people in and where they promote from within and will provide some health benefits, if possible.

Anne: Thanks.

**Kathleen Newland:** OK. Could we have the next caller?

**Operator:** Certainly. We'll go to our next caller.

Female: Hi. I had a question about specifically what type of support the refugees typically get when they arrive, just to understand more about what types of backfill would be needed by volunteers and community activists.

**Bob Carey:** I'd be happy to take that. Maybe Kate can expand on it.

You know generally, under the State Department agreement, which is a public-private partnership, which the voluntary agencies also you know provide private and volunteer support to, which we marshal, it's really quite limited. You know it's assistance for, under the agreement, one month.

If IRC or another organization is providing assistance beyond that, it's with private money that we've raised. So, it's – and even within that one month, often it requires a supplement of private funds.

But what we often rely on volunteers to do is to enhance that experience, to provide – we provide very basic furnishing for apartments. But often, our volunteer supporters will provide other things, which will make the house warmer, more inviting and provide a warmer welcome.

Our caseworker time is limited. And often we are looking to volunteers to do very specific things, which is you know help transporting refugees to a medical appointment, or something of that sort.

But I think I'd like to underscore that that's best done when it's coordinated with the agency at the local level, so that people aren't doing – repeating things, or doing it – you know that they're not duplicating effort.

And Kate, do you have something to add to this?

**Kate Reid:** No. I mean, I think exactly what you said is what I would say. It often helps – what Bob just mentioned is very important in coordinating, particularly for things like medical appointments.

You know we have a volunteer coordinator at our office. I don't know that all offices have that. And what would be best for us, for instance, would be if somebody would work through a volunteer coordinator that we have at our office, so they could actually discuss what's needed. You know so it is – the coordination is very important.

**Female:** OK. And just, I had a follow-up question to that. I had heard a rumor that some of the Iraqis were concerned that there were – there was a ((inaudible)) to pay back some of these services or loans, or the flight, the cost of their air ticket after a certain point. And if not, they would be fined or have to be sent back, or something like that.

Can you speak to those?

**Bob Carey:** Certainly. I'd be happy to jump in on that. And there are documents which refugees have provided. Under the State Department system, refugees are actually given a loan to travel to the United States, which is administered by IOM, the International Organization for Migration. And that goes into a State Department revolving fund.

So, what happens is that, refugees who come here pay back the travel loan. And that goes into a fund which supports future refugee travel.

So, it's not that, you know – they're not paying, even though the payment comes through the resettlement agency, it goes from there back to the State Department to support the ongoing travel of refugees to the United States.

I think it's important to know that the expectation on repayment is that people pay consistently, but to the extent they are able, and that they – you know there is a recognition that refugees have very limited resources when they arrive here, and long-term small payments are part of that, and can be part of that, and can be discussed with their resettlement agency and a plan worked out that will hopefully work for everyone.

But this is not – I think it's important to know that this is not something that they're paying back to the resettlement agency. It goes back to a fund that serves all refugees.

And when refugees come to the United States, they have signed a promissory note, which is hopefully in their own language, which outlines the terms of the loan.

In terms of the response, the State Department does require that, if refugees do not pay back their loan, that it will eventually be reported to a credit bureau

But that's not something that, you know – the other side of that is refugees who do pay back their loan develop a positive credit history in the United States, which allows them later to take out car loans, or apply for mortgages or credit cards, because they have demonstrated that they are responsible borrowers.

**Female:** OK.

**Kate Reid:** I just wanted to add something to that. I just know in our office, I myself have been in negotiations sometimes with IOM over people's loans. So, when people – excuse me – do come and speak to us about a problem with it, we do respond to that.

**Female:** OK.

**Kathleen Newland:** Shall we go on to the next question?

**Kate Reid:** Yes, that's fine.

**Operator:** Certainly. We'll take our next caller.

**Kathleen Newland:** Please go ahead.

**Elizabeth:** Hi. My name's Elizabeth, and I'm calling from the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York. And we're trying to develop a project to support Iraqi journalists who are resettling here through the resettlement program.

And I think one of the things we want to do is talk to some of the news outlets who are bringing their – or helping to bring their staff people here, and some of the questions that they give us. It would be helpful to just get a sort of – I know it varies state to state. But what is sort of the ballpark estimate of support that most Iraqi refugees receive when they get here?

**Bob Carey:** In terms of duration or amount?

**Elizabeth:** Both.

**Bob Carey:** Well, it's – you know I think as I mentioned earlier, under the State Department agreement it's one month. Now, many agencies have, as Kate mentioned, say, Health and Human Services matching grant funds to support people who are employable as they – for a number of additional months – as they search for work.

Unfortunately, that program is not funded at the level we would like it to be. So, most of the slots in that program were used up by the time Iraqis began to arrive in the fourth quarter of this year.

Refugees are eligible for public assistance after the voluntary agency support has ended, but that varies widely state by state. So, it is tied to public assistance benefit levels in the individual states. So, it would obviously be very different in Texas and New York and California, for instance.

**Elizabeth:** And in terms of where people are relocated, I mean, based on my experience, it just depends on where they have ties, whether it's professional or family ties. Is that right?

**Bob Carey:** There is an effort made in the placement process to place people where they have ties. However you know the expectation is that, if they're meaningful ties. Because, beyond that you know for instance, there may be a particular community in the U.S. which has, even before the economic downturn, very bad employment – very limited employment opportunities and very expensive housing.

So, an effort is made, to the extent possible, to place people where the opportunities for successful integration are the best. And that's something that the State Department has worked out with all of the resettlement agencies through a pretty detailed planning process.

And also try to make sure that not too many people are going to any one community at a given time. That obviously doesn't work when most people arrive in the fourth quarter. But even beyond that, an effort is made to really distribute people around the country, so one community or school system or health system is not overwhelmed and the services compromised.

**Female:** And I just have one quick question.

**Kathleen Newland:** Sure.

**Female:** And it's for – do you know off-hand what options there might be for counseling, especially for post-traumatic stress counseling?

**Bob Carey:** Yes. Unfortunately – and Kate can talk to this, as well – I think this is a concern for many of us, because that really is a state-by-state system. And there are centers for victims of torture, but they don't exist in all locations.

I know that IRC, and I'm sure many of our colleague agencies, to the extent we're aware of people's suffering from severe trauma, which we recognize is very common among this population and not always reflected in the information we get, to the extent we're aware of it, we try to place people where there are services.

Some states have been much more proactive than others in funding this kind of service. For instance, in Arizona, IRC's offices do have mental health services. And in some other locations there are close relationships with mental health providers or with torture victim centers, which work with refugees.

But there are other locations where the system is really inadequate, and as it is inadequate for Americans in need of such services. And one thing we would like to see in a new program is a baseline of mental health services for all refugees who need them across the country.

**Female:** OK.

**Kate Reid:** Yes. Just to add to that – I'm sorry, Kathleen. We do have a mental health program here, so we are able to offer counseling. We also have – like, for an Iraqi woman right now – we have a support group that meets about once a week. And then we do have a pretty good mental health system in Phoenix, where we can refer to if something's more serious than just the counseling needs.

**Kathleen Newland:** And this is an area where there certainly is a role for other non-governmental organizations to bring in additional help beyond what the governmental programs offer.

Shall we go on to the next question, please?

**Operator:** Certainly. We'll go to our next question.

**Kathleen Newland:** Please go ahead.

**Alaa Rasheed:** Hi. This is Alaa Rasheed. I'm a refugee here in ((inaudible)). Actually, I do have some comments on here, because I came here with some difficulties I faced with the agency, for me and for other people.

Actually, the first point I have, that these people are afraid from talking sometimes about their problems, because they feel like they will be treated by the – badly by the agency they are responsible by.

The most important thing is that the agency does not to give us any orientation about the situation or the life here in U.S. As you know everything here is different from over there in Iraq and in the countries we were (hostage by). So that many people, they don't know what they have here, what they can do or get, what they can't do, whatever. Nothing. They don't have any information about these.

Some people actually – they have degrees. Some of them are doctors. Some of them are engineers. And they try to get in the line to continue their studies or to do a kind of job concerning their specialty. But when they go to the agency, they didn't find any kind of help. They just – they try to push them in any kind of work. If it's work, a hard job, or something like that, it doesn't matter what kind of work.

But in addition to that, we have a good education of people here. But maybe they (come mixed) with the society here. But as I said, they are doctors, and they are engineers.

So, many people when they go to the agency try to get these things, or these issues. They answer at the agency, “Oh, it’s not a time for these issues. We have to take care of your house. We have to take care of ((inaudible)).”

And the same way they have problems, in the houses, and the problems with not good houses. Actually, we have one family, they have problem in their houses. (They are treated bad) and they suffer many times. And they try to get out of this house. They couldn’t get any help from the agency. They said, no, you don’t have. You have to stay in this house.

**Kathleen Newland:** Yes.

**Alaa Rasheed:** And other things, actually with other families. Actually, I’m talking about, on behalf of some families also.

Sometimes they don’t need to go ESL, because they speak English well, and they don’t need that. But they are forced by the agency to attend these lectures. It’s not a problem, if the agency wants that.

But how can they get to the agency? The problem is transportation. Transportation here is so difficult. Some people live far away from the agency, and they have to pay every day about \$5 for transportation. And they don’t get any help from the agency in this ((inaudible)).

Other issues – actually, other issues, actually, about (the donations). The agency, I know they’ve got (donations) from different people, from the volunteers. Many people they need for these (donations). When they go to the agency, they don’t find anything.

I think – as I think, as I see, the agency helps a different place to keep these (donations). And when any people came to the agency, ask for the (donations) for furniture or for anything, they said we don’t have. But we see another people get this stuff ((inaudible)). So ...

**Kathleen Newland:** OK, Mr. Rasheed. Thank you very much. I think you’ve done a – you’ve given us a good picture of the great variety of problems that people have to deal with when they arrive here.

And I know that my colleagues are very well aware of the difficulty. You know the resettlement process is really a difficult one. So, let’s ...

**Kate Reid:** Can I ((inaudible)) a little bit ...

**Kathleen Newland:** Yes, please.

**Kate Reid:** ... to some of this? Yes.

I wanted to – I think the first thing that you mentioned was orientation. And I think that is very important, and it’s a very – in many ways it’s a very valid point that you bring up.

Because I think that there is an orientation provided. I can't speak, again, for the office that you were resettled by, because I have not been there. But in our office, for instance, there is an orientation provided, both by our employment team and by our case management team, which includes a lot about the U.S.

There's also – you know they're at the apartments with them, and they show them different things in the apartments, and also in the community.

But it does happen to come all at once in the beginning as we're getting people settled. And I think that there's just this overflow of information sometimes that people don't always absorb. And they're not able to. No one is. The coming in, especially new to a place, and being tired maybe from a flight a couple of nights before. So, I do think that there's an issue with that.

One of the ways we're trying to deal with it in the Arizona office, for instance, is we've gotten – we've just put on board an orientation coordinator that will be doing orientations on top of the initial orientations, that will be reminding people, but also helping them understand more about systems in the U.S. And that can be anything from the law enforcement system to the school system to the health care system. So, it's actually trying to build upon the initial orientation that they get in.

But again, as Bob mentioned, that's being funded by other sources. We were able to get some state funding for that.

The issue about the people with medical backgrounds, again, that's something that we've been trying to address a lot here. And we've had several meetings with the medical community on that. And we're doing something called an interpreter project, where we're trying to get people who have medical backgrounds and English skills to be able to be certified – in interpreting, at least – for the medical, the hospitals.

In terms of recertification for their medical degree, that's something much larger. And I think our California office may have dealt a bit with that. And there are a lot of expenses involved in that.

And it is true that when the employment coordinators are working with these people, their goal is to really get them in the first job that they can, because realistically speaking, that's what's going to help them pay the rent.

It doesn't mean that further down the line they can't be thinking about moving to a different type of job, or working with these other programs to help them get recertified. And those are things we can help them with.

But the reality is that the first job really has to come as soon as possible, because we don't have the funding to be continuing to pay people's rent. And we don't want them, certainly, out on the street.

And then, as far as the donations issue. I really, again, don't know what's happening with that. But I do know that in some offices, it's difficult when we get somebody who calls to say, "Well, I want to donate something just for this particular family," because we're dealing with a lot of refugees here that have a lot of needs.

And it can start to look like favoritism, if we keep getting donations for a particular family, and all those donations are going to a particular family.

So, what we often say to people is you know that's really great, but we would like you to just donate to the general pool. And then, as needs come up, we'll be supporting that.

If somebody wants to donate – if they know a family and they go to their house to give them something, that's fine. But when we get calls for specific families, that's a little bit difficult for us to field, because we really have refugees from all over.

And you know sometimes we've even gotten specific funding just for Iraqi refugees, which we only spend on Iraqi refugees. But then, we have to remember that we have refugees from other communities that are in need, too.

And the transportation issue, that's something we're battling with every day. And we are providing bus cards, certainly when people first come in. We're now looking to provide them for more months. Certainly during the job search, we'd be providing them.

But I agree with you. It's very difficult here in Arizona. It's sometimes even more difficult, because the public transport stops at night you know past 12 or one o'clock in the morning. And then we have people who are on night shifts working, and we have difficulty getting them home.

So, that's my answer to some of those things. I don't know if it helped any.

**Kathleen Newland:** Thanks, Kate.

**Bob Carey:** I think, Kate, you summarized it pretty well. But it does reflect you know it's a very diverse system. And the public transportation system in the United States in general is not what many of us would like to see.

And there are a lot of people who suffer, or are really challenged, because of – you know hopefully, there are other benefits in communities that outweigh that in the long run. But in the short term, it is a problem unless you're in one of the major cities where there's a good public transportation system. But those cities have their other challenges – often high cost of living, and other challenges.

So, it's – but it is a difficult thing. And as Kate referenced you know these – the U.S. is a very mobile job market, which I think is a significant adjustment for people who come here. You know and people do often have to get a work history here, but people often do, as well, move up rather quickly in the U.S. employment market as they gain experience.

I know that's very hard to envision when people are going through those very difficult first months. But if you look at people who have been here for a number of years, whether Iraqi or others, they've generally – many of them have managed to, over a period of time, re-enter their profession.

I think there should be – we would like to see and we would like to have – more services to help people with those second jobs, upgrading and recertification. And that's certainly something that we are working with our government partners to encourage funding for.

**Kathleen Newland:** Great. I'd like to thank Mr. (Rashid) for bringing up those issues. And let's go on to the next question, please.

Operator, can you give us the next ...

**Carol Chandler-Rourke:** Hi. This is Carol Chandler-Rourke from Massachusetts Office for Refugees and Immigrants.

And I wanted to just say, and then ask a question, that a lot of the support services that you describe, such as you know the transportation and navigating systems and ongoing orientation that you're using volunteers for is something that the MAAs do quite effectively, usually.

So ...

**Kathleen Newland:** That's mutual assistance ...

Carol Chandler-Rourke: The mutual assistance associations. Right. And the ethnic community-based organizations that come out of communities. And I know it takes a long time to establish those organizations, and so, new groups don't always have those established.

But I'm just wondering, in Massachusetts we have been very successful helping small groups start in new communities by having established MAAs help them.

And so, I'm just wondering what kind of efforts are out there to establish organizations within those communities and to support them, or to support existing MAAs to help others – to help the Iraqi group.

**Kathleen Newland:** I think this might be a good question on which to call on Danya, from the Project for Strengthening Organizations Assisting Refugees.

Danya, do you want to ...

**Danya Pastuszek:** Sure, sure.

**Kathleen Newland:** Thanks.

Danya Pastuszek: I think a great resource for newer MAAs is their refugee state coordinator's offices, because those offices maintain lists of more established MAAs or ethnic community-based organizations, who are operating in the geographic vicinity of the people who might like to start the new organizations. So, those certainly are a good starting point.

We also maintain our projects for a directory, not of every MAA in the country, but certainly of a good number and of many of the established ones. So, if anyone has specific questions, you'd be welcome to e-mail us to find out, perhaps, from us about the organizations that are already in existence in your state.

**Kathleen Newland:** OK. Thank you.

Carol – sorry.

**Bob Carey:** I just ...

Carol Chandler-Rourke: Well, I just – I guess I was asking if there's any effort to support the establishment of those groups.

**Kate Reid:** Can I just speak for the Phoenix office?

**Kathleen Newland:** Yes.

**Kate Reid:** We do have somebody who is working with the MAAs, and we actually have a small grants program that's been provided to the MAAs for them to do their own projects. So, they actually applied for it and then got small-scale grants to do specific projects in the community.

And we do have MAAs that are functioning here and that we meet with on a regular basis, and that we involve in our trainings, and that definitely call when there's issues.

I use them sometimes when I'm having specific issues that I think they might be able to help a family out with – or families that are isolated, families that come in that are of a particular background and they're isolated, and I know there's this association there. I link them up, so that they can meet other people from their country, and hopefully get some assistance, as well.

**Kathleen Newland:** I think Carol's question was also going to the question of groups that don't yet have an established MAA.

Do the voluntary agencies make any effort to sort of tell them about how you go about establishing one? Bob?

**Bob Carey:** Well, I think, certainly from IRC and many of our – you know there are many actors that play a vital role in the resettlement process. And it's certainly not limited to resettlement agencies. And MAAs have been a critical component.

And in terms of what project SOAR – I mean, many of these things are a function, as well, of what an individual state has chosen to fund and support at the local level. Or we have here at Project SOAR – and Danya didn't give, I think, a full explanation – but Project SOAR is actually a technical assistance program, funded by ORR, which supports MAAs.

So, we provide them with support under ORR funding to, for instance, get information on how to incorporate, how to create a board, how to comply with U.S. tax laws. So, and Danya could tell you more, but I think she could direct you to resources that are available, or which they could provide training resources on how to – not funding – but resources on how to develop an MAA, or how to effectively manage that.

We conduct trainings with ORR funding at various places around the country.

**Kathleen Newland:** And presumably includes how to look for funding.

**Bob Carey:** Yes.

**Kate Reid:** And we've also conducted a training with a non-profit management group here on how to start a non-profit, as well. And a lot of them attended. A lot of people attended that were interested in that.

**Danya Pastuszek:** Yes, I think that – this is Danya again – I think that's a great point. Another great resource within states are large universities that have non-profit management programs – things like the Foundation Center, what to do, informational trainings and information dissemination around planning for fund-raising, around deciding what's the best way to fund your organization, about deciding what kinds of activities are most important, given the impact that you want to have.

So, I think, in addition to the large national providers, there are a lot of resources available through the refugee state coordinator's offices, through the universities and through local and non-profit management centers. I just want to give them credit for the good work they're doing with MAAs, too.

**Kathleen Newland:** Great. Thanks, Danya.

OK, Carol. Does that answer your question, at least in part?

I think we can go on to the next question, please.

**Operator:** Certainly. And just a reminder for everyone, if you'd like to signal for a question, or ask a follow-up, please press star one on your touch-tone telephone at this time.

**Kathleen Newland:** OK. Thank you. The next caller?

**Female:** Hi. It's Iraqi (Dial) Network again. I would like to make a comment on the question about the mutual assistance associations. There are groups. I know the caller mentioned ethnically – ethnic organizations. There are lots of those groups in California, and a lot of the Assyrians and Chaldean Iraqis. There are also a lot of Kurdish associations around the national area.

But I'd like to – our organization is trying to promote some of this cross-cultural and tolerance-based, working together and getting the Iraqis to reestablish cross-ethnic ties. So, I'd like to ask organizations if they're working on that at all.

Then I had another question about, are the VOLAGs working with the state refugee coordinators to establish, say, like a one-stop hotline for the Iraqis? Thank you.

**Kathleen Newland:** OK. Thank you for that question.

And as our IRC staff are sort of gathering their thoughts about that, I'd like to remind all the callers on the line that there are a great many topics that you can address in your comments or questions, including you know managing the expectations of refugees, what the sort of current resettlement environment is like in the current economic situation, the sort of cultural integration and housing, and other benefits.

So, we encourage you to hit star one and get in line with your questions.

OK. Bob, do you want to start with the ...

**Bob Carey:** I think, certainly, the suggestion about a hotline is a great one. You know when I think – whether it's a national one or state-by-state, that really would be under the purview of individual state refugee coordinators. But I think it's a great idea. And we can certainly, through our discussions with them, put that forward as a suggestion, and as well with the federal agencies we work with.

I think that ...

**Kathleen Newland:** OK. Thanks for the suggestion.

**Kate Reid:** I don't – yes, and I don't know that one exists here.

But I do think, also, the suggestion about trying to work across groups is excellent, because we do find that people still – they become resettled and they still pull back into their groups, even if they're from the same country. So, I think that is an excellent, excellent point that we all need to look at.

**Kathleen Newland:** OK. Thanks, Kate.

Could we have the next question, please?

**Operator:** Certainly. We'll take our next question.

**Kathleen Newland:** Hello? Please go ahead.

**Penny Boyd:** Hi. My name's Penny Boyd. I'm with the Office of Newcomer Services in Virginia. And my question is not specifically to refugees, and has to do with the special immigrant visas.

And I was wondering if – and this might be a question for Elissa Mittman. I'm trying to understand how the State Department – the authority under which the State Department decided that the only people eligible for reception and placement are those that apply for it overseas.

Because we still have SIVs arriving that have not come through the reception and placement. And throughout this discussion, we've talked about one month of housing. And that's not available to them. And I was wondering if anybody has any thoughts on that.

**Kathleen Newland:** Elissa, do you want to start off on that one?

**Elissa Mittman:** Sure. Basically, individuals have the option that, when they are overseas and at the consular office, that they can elect to choose to come through the International Organization for Migration. This process started approximately in late spring. I don't have an exact date for you.

Therefore, if they choose to come through IOM, then they would come to the United States, be eligible for refugee travel loans, and then would be eligible for State Department R&P money, if it was available.

So, if they choose at that point, unfortunately, to turn down the assistance at that interview, they are then unfortunately denied being able to be enrolled in the R&P program, as well as travel loans.

Some individuals, some SIVs who have chosen this, is because they feel they would rather come sooner than later, and just, if they have ready cash available, hop on the next flight to the U.S. once their immigrant visa is available.

**Kathleen Newland:** Just – caller, does that answer your question, that ...

**Penny Boyd:** Actually, I ...

**Kathleen Newland:** Do you feel that people aren't aware of the choice that they're making when they ...

**Penny Boyd:** That is my – I'm wondering two things. And I know that Elissa can't answer this. But the authority under which the – since the law under which we're operating says that refugee – that the Special Immigrant Visas are eligible for refugee services, how they can make that

decision not to offer – well, I understand that there she’s saying that they’re offered. But we’ve had people come that were not offered. And ...

**Elissa Mittman:** I think the question is, is you probably would need to look back at when that individual potentially was interviewed in the process – or not interviewed – because, as I said, from what I understood from the State Department, it was about late spring that this policy was implemented.

I cannot personally explain to you why DOS did implement this policy, but it is their policy.

You may have individuals who were potentially interviewed ahead of time, for example, and then got caught up in this – sort of this window of opportunity – where we had maximized out the 500 Special Immigrant Visas for the year, and then we were waiting for the additional ones through the Kennedy technical fix. So you may have had individuals then.

My recommendation would be, regardless, any SIV that walks in through your door, you should be trying to submit an application to the State Department. And then you can see whether they are accepted or whether they’re rejected.

We have an internal IRC HQ process of how we work with individuals who walk in the door from the field. It gets bumped up to headquarters, and then we work with State Department to facilitate – to see if they are eligible for benefits.

**Kathleen Newland:** Well, that sounds like a route to try.

But I certainly don’t know under what authority the State Department made that decision. And Bob is shaking his head at me, as well.

It’s a good question, but perhaps it does – it is explained by this gap between the old, very small quota for Special Immigrant Visas and the new program under the Kennedy legislation.

**Bob Carey:** And there was you know as Elissa and many people know, there was a period during the fix where it was implemented in stages, so you know when the numbers were expanded. And as with any new program, things may not be done consistently from one point to the next while it’s being implemented.

**Kathleen Newland:** So, it’s worth taking those cases to the State Department and applying to see if people are eligible.

**Elissa Mittman:** And if I could add one more comment, Kathleen. I think also what we need to look at is, you also need to determine the SIVs that are arriving, are they principals, or are they derivatives?

And the reason why that ...

**Kathleen Newland:** You mean, are they – are they – the applicants themselves or ...

**Elissa Mittman:** Are they the main ...

**Kathleen Newland:** ... ((inaudible)) their families?

Elissa Mittman: Are they the main – for example, is it, for example, the husband and his, say, wife and child? Or is the husband already here, and the wife and child are coming at a later time, as a derivative?

The reason that would be, for example, because of State Department policy and procedure, again, if the – I'm using just the example of the husband – if the husband arrived before 12/26 of '07, and the wife and child now are arriving, say – or arrived in May 2008, and the husband was ineligible for benefits before, or later on elected not to get benefits, then the spouse and child would also be ineligible.

So, there are a lot of different shades and nuances that you would need to analyze each case on a case-by-case basis. As well as, if you think there is an issue on a case, definitely, it should be bumped to State Department.

**Kathleen Newland:** OK. This is obviously a very complicated issue. And I hope that the State Department can give complete information about how to sort through those complexities.

But thank you for raising that – thank you for raising that issue.

Could we have our next question, please?

**Operator:** Certainly. Before we go to that question, we do have one question left in the queue. If you would like to ask a question or pose a follow-up question, please press star one on your touch-tone telephone at this time.

And we'll go to that next question.

**Kathleen Newland:** OK. Thank you.

Caller?

**Carol Chandler-Rourke:** Hi. This is Carol again from Massachusetts. And I just wanted to respond to the woman from California who talked about the cross – the need for cross-cultural work.

We do have a coalition of MAAs who – 11 organizations – who work together in Massachusetts. And they help to support new groups, as well, and they apply for grants together. And it's very effective in trying to leverage resources within their communities.

**Kathleen Newland:** That sounds like a great model.

And you've found that it's been successful in helping MAAs get themselves established, helping new MAAs get themselves established?

**Carol Chandler-Rourke:** It helps new MAAs get themselves established. And also, there's no real network for MAA directors. So, it provides a network. They've been around since about 2000. And they've been able to get a variety of different programs and work with the mainstream institutions where they're resettling.

And that's why – I know it's not a panacea, but I think the establishment of MAAs in new communities is really an important puzzle – a piece of the puzzle.

**Danya Pastuszek:** This is Danya again. And I would just say, in terms of what I'm aware of, I think Massachusetts and Arizona do an especially good job of this kind of integration work. I'm aware of other informal and more formal coalitions in other states – in Georgia, for example, in California.

But I do know that the refugee state coordinator's office is, again, as Carol is implying, do have access to information about what coalitions there might be. So, just to reiterate that they're a great place to start with, to find out if there might be coalitions of the kind that Carol's talking about, where you are.

**Kathleen Newland:** Yes, indeed. That's a great point.

Do we have any further questions or comments from those of you who are on the call?

**Operator:** And we did have a couple more come in. We'll go to our next question.

**Kathleen Newland:** Thank you. Please go ahead.

**Anne:** Hi. It's Anne again from Iraqi Job Network. I know that the law allows the Iraqis to get – the SIVs to get – eight months of benefits, and the Afghans get six months.

Could you specify, what are the regular refugee time periods for benefits?

And also, is there anything that you think might be able to be done to shorten these in-processing periods? Because the Iraqis that I work with, they're averaging about one-and-a-half to two months before they even are able to get their benefits, like their food stamps. So, that cuts out a large period of their eligibility period.

Thank you.

**Kathleen Newland:** Thanks. Bob, do you have any thoughts on that?

**Bob Carey:** Maybe Elissa, can you talk about the eligibility, or application? I think – this is a problem that's not confined to California, unfortunately. And it's not confined to the SIV process.

There are – and it is something that we see as a critical need in many locations with a host of things, whether it's qualifying for SSI, where people you know we'd like to see – and one of the proposals that's out there – for instance, is some kind of prequalification before people enter the U.S., so they are essentially fast-tracked on employment authorization or eligibility for SSI, or eligibility for access to other benefits, because delays – and whether it's health screenings or access to needed services – do exist across the country in different forms.

And it's something that we would like to see taking place in a more uniform, expedited and coherent way across the U.S., whether – and to fix that – either through just a review of how the program operates or a legislative reform process.

But it's not – you know it's something we see across the country, particularly at the times of heavy arrivals, where these delays are throughout the systems.

**Kathleen Newland:** And creates some real problems, yes.

Elissa, do you have anything to add to that?

**Elissa Mittman:** I think I would probably just add, I think you asked for also a comparison with refugees. Basically, the resettlement benefits between SIVs and refugees are generally about the same. As Bob mentioned earlier, R&P is generally for 30 days.

And match grant has generally been available for four to six months, if match grant funds are available. But unfortunately, ((inaudible)) arrival, most were used up.

Public benefits are available for eight months for the Iraqi refugees, asylees and Special Immigrant Visas.

The Afghans came under a different law. They came under Senator Cardin's amendment, which gave them six months. But I can tell you, there have been advocacy efforts to increase that to the eight months, (to) keep them on a parity with the Iraqis.

We are hearing from across the United States on the issue of benefits and enrollment. Unfortunately, it does take some time. And similarly, we are working on that issue in Washington, as well.

**Anne:** Can I just ask a quick follow-up?

**Kathleen Newland:** Sure.

**Anne:** One of you mentioned that you were still helping people five years on. Under what mandate is that? And did they – would all Iraqis come to expect that they could call on the VOLAGs that late after they've been here?

**Kate Reid:** Yes, I can address that, because that was me. That's mostly state funding for us. And just to be clear on what type of help it is, it is not financial assistance. The financial assistance that we provide is when a new arrival gets here.

Where we do provide past the point of you know six months, a year, up to five years, is any kind of assistance with employment searches. If people are having issues with domestic problems, if people are having issues with documents – just in general, if people are still having trouble navigating the system, we will have someone there to do – they come in. They reapply for services. We assign them a case manager. And if they're interested, if the problem is employment, we assign them an employment coordinator, as well.

And then, those people work with them in terms of managing their case and helping them to adjust and go to appointments, and things like that. But it is not financial assistance. I just want to be clear on that.

**Anne:** But that's very important. So, you said that was just specific to Arizona, though?

**Kate Reid:** You know I know that we do it here, and I'm not sure, because for us it's state funding, so I would assume it's different in different offices. I don't know, Bob, you might ...

**Bob Carey:** It is. It's a state-by-state system. And I think you know at the same – in the same regard you know many IRC offices have economic development programs, which we work with refugees on for you know five years or more, which can include financial literacy at the most basic level, learning about the American banking system. And we have tax assistance programs helping people to file their tax or file for earned income tax credits. Or ...

**Amber:** We have a (home buying) ...

**Bob Carey:** ... micro enterprise, a farm program, after school programs for youth and children and mother pre-schooler programs.

Unfortunately, those are inconsistently available. We have been able to get them funded, often through private funders in different locations.

And our hope is that, in the future, those will be a core part of every resettlement program in the United States, because we really believe they're needed across the country. But right now, it really is a piecemeal system.

And ...

**Anne:** (It really) ((inaudible)).

**Bob Carey:** ... you know it's really a function of what private or government funds are available in a given location and what the priorities of the state refugee coordinator's office are.

**Kathleen Newland:** And it's something that you know IRC works hard on the private sector fund-raising side to try to augment the resources that are available for programs like that. It's ...

Elissa Mittman: And if I can add – this is Elissa again – it's really important to get the Iraqis who arrived on Special Immigrant Visas really employed immediately, even if it is in a job that is not within their career, or it's not at a pay they want.

The reason is, because they are arriving as immigrants, they are not arriving as refugees, once the public benefits have been terminated, they are ineligible for any U.S. public benefits for five years. But that is a standard law across the board for any individual who is a lawful permanent resident. So, it's not a law specifically directed at Iraqis. It's directed at all lawful permanent residents in the United States.

So, I would encourage those of you who work with Iraqi SIVs, especially, it's really crucial to get them employed as soon as possible.

**Kathleen Newland:** Yes, absolutely. That's an important point.

And I think also important to convey that you know your first job in the United States doesn't set you on a path that confines you to you know to a less skilled job than the skills that you bring. You know there is a great deal of economic mobility in the U.S. employment system. And people need to realize that there are lots of possibilities for them after that first job.

**Anne:** Are you all seeing an attrition rate of Iraqis going back to Iraq? I mean, the ones I deal with, I'd say about 30% going back, because of employment problems.

**Kathleen Newland:** Really? That's very interesting. It's – curiously, it's consistent with the sort of overall rate of return migration from the United States across the board and across the decades in different groups.

Bob, are you ...

**Bob Carey:** That's much higher than any number that I've heard from our offices. We've heard of, occasionally of people returning. We've also heard of people returning, and then finding that the situation to which they returned was much less secure than they thought it was.

And what we encourage people to do is to try to get their permanent legal status in the U.S., if possible, before they return, because then it will, if they go on a refugee travel document, it preserves their right of return.

So, and that's critical, particularly if people are going back to a situation that is not secure, that you know could be potentially life-threatening. If they have managed to do it in such a way that they can still come back, if they need to for their own protection, that, we think, is critically important.

**Kathleen Newland:** OK. Thank you for raising that. I'd like to go to the next question. I think we have another caller on line.

Female: Yes. I just had a question. I met with several Iraqis when I was in Chicago. And many of them were working sort of under minimum wage. And they were scared about paying taxes, which is why they were sort of in these exploitive circumstances.

And I just felt that it's so important to inform them about the importance of keeping a tax record, that often, if you don't make that much in a year, you don't actually have to pay a very high rate.

And that's just – I know that you had mentioned that there's some programs with people that can help filing taxes for them. I just was wondering if I can get more information about that.

**Bob Carey:** Sure. There is – if I may jump in on this. There's a program through – it's called – that are called VITA sites, V-I-T-A. And I'm sure if you Google it, you can find them. And IRC has, in most of our offices, we are certified VITA sites.

And what happens in those is, we actually work with volunteers – another area where they've been very helpful – provide training, often people who have a background in finance. And then, they will work with us. We have workshops to help refugees file their tax returns.

Many are not making often very much money when they first get here. They are often eligible for a tax rebate. So, they file their tax return and they actually get money back. Often you know sometimes thousands of dollars, which can help them purchase a car or do something else, which can really help them establish a more stable existence in the United States.

But you know we're not in all locations, but there are VITA sites, usually run by non-profits and volunteer organizations, that will help low-income people file tax returns and, if they are eligible, receiving their income tax credit.

**Female:** OK. Great. Thank you.

**Kate Reid:** Kathleen, can I just jump in on that? I just wanted to stress that you know we – I don't know who actually got jobs for those people, but just in terms of the resettlement offices, we wouldn't be getting jobs for people below minimum wage, because, obviously, everything we look at, we want them to have benefits, and we want it to be completely legal.

**Kathleen Newland:** Yes. There's certainly no reason why any resettling refugee should be working in a below minimum wage job, unless it's some very special category, like a waiter, whose salary plus tips still comes to more than the minimum wage.

So, that's – yes, that's a very important point.

Can we get on to – we're quickly running out of time. Let's see if we can get through the queue.

**Operator:** We'll go next to Maura.

**Maura Stephens:** Hi. Thank you. This is Maura Stephens with the Iraqi Refugees Assistance Connection in New York and Massachusetts.

I actually wanted to make one request to everybody to please not use acronyms and jargon, because ...

**Kathleen Newland:** Sorry about that.

**Maura Stephens:** ... not everybody is as familiar with the governmental terminology as those who work in it all the time.

**Kathleen Newland:** A very good point. The ORR, by the way, is the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which is part of the Department of Health and Human Services. I noticed that one slipped by, too.

**Maura Stephens:** Thank you.

I wanted to ask this group, if there's anybody interested in working on rewriting national policy papers – you know writing papers for Congress, and connecting with Congress members in the new Congress, to change some of these policies that are giving us all headaches all the time. If so, I'd be happy to help IRC with that, if you want to start a (list) ((inaudible)) or something like that, if there are other people interested.

**Kathleen Newland:** Thank you very much, Maura.

**Bob Carey:** Certainly. I think that's a good – a great idea. In fact, a number of the agencies and coalitions that we work with are in the process of, or have prepared, policy papers for the incoming administration on topics related to refugee assistance.

So, the Refugee Council USA has recently – they are not online yet, because they were just produced. But they should be going on the Refugee Council Web site in the very near future. And then, Interaction has worked jointly with the Refugee Council and are (acting) as an umbrella organization of non-profit groups that work in international assistance. However, their papers I believe are focused primarily on international assistance, but some of them are joint.

So, certainly, I would encourage you to join that process. And there's certainly other coalitions. And we would you know if you contact our colleagues at the Refugee Council, or even at the IRC, I think we could try to coordinate with the various coalitions we are working with or know about and we could really join forces to look at some of the program reforms we'd all like to see.

**Kathleen Newland:** Yes. Thanks, Maura. This is a good time to be bringing things like that to the attention of the new administration. Could we have the next call please?

**Operator:** Certainly ((inaudible)) the next call.

**Kathleen Newland:** Please go ahead.

**Female:** Hi, I'm one of your ((inaudible)) refugees and I have a problem that my family moved to D.C. area but not as one family unit so I arrived with my husband and still waiting for the other family members to come later.

And I don't know if you can help me like the resettlement agency can help rent me an apartment for a couple of months? Not like have a contract for a whole year so that I don't pay for the whole year for apartment which will not fit the whole family.

**Kathleen Newland:** Right. I'm sure you're not alone in facing issues like that as – and I thank you for calling in. You know we can't over the phone address you know an individual case although we'll leave a number where you can make that specific inquiry.

But I'd like to ask if any of the IRC staff can say a word about what kind of flexibility is available to families that are in the kind of situation that our caller finds herself in where a larger family group is expected than arrives in the first instance?

Have you had any experience with that, Kate, or?

**Kate Reid:** I've had, yes, we've had experiences, not necessarily with families joining them but with trying to get people rental agreements that are less than say three or six months and it really – it's a case by case basis and it depends on the apartment complexes that people are dealing with.

And I didn't, perhaps I didn't hear on when she actually arrived, so I don't know within what period she is in terms of you know did IRC resettle her and all of that and what you know where is she in the timeline of resettlement would also make a difference.

So it's just something that would be hard to – she would have to call the office directly.

**Kathleen Newland:** OK. Caller, we'll try to plug into somebody who can answer your specific question and thank you very much for joining the call. I think we perhaps have time for one more call before we wrap up?

**Operator:** We'll go to that call now.

**Kathleen Newland:** Thank you.

**Maan Ahreez:** Hello, my name is Maan Ahreez: I'm talking from Worcester, Massachusetts. A doctor in my country but here when I came I ask about re-certification.

**Kathleen Newland:** Yes.

**Maan Ahreez:** When I ask my (GNC) which is at (Newton) social services they said you should not ask about that now because we must deal with your furniture and food, but eventually I received just a dresser, an older dresser with a couch full with bedbugs from them.

I just want to know the routine of re-certification and also I want to ask about the, because I have many problems with them. Caseworkers don't do anything for me. I do the applications with the TTA by myself so just I ask for that. Thank you.

**Kathleen Newland:** OK. Well, thank you very much for calling and I certainly wish you the best in this difficult process. Let me ask Bob Carey, obviously he can't comment on your individual case, but ask him to comment on resources that the resettlement agencies might be able to link you up with.

**Bob Carey:** Certainly, and I - this is not a problem that - it's a problem for many Iraqi refugees and some other refugees as well. But certainly we are - we know that within the Iraqi population, there are many professionals, doctors, engineers, highly skilled people. And certainly I believe that those people are a great asset to the United States and right now, they are not - their full talents are not being used. And that is something that should be rectified.

It is an issue that we're talking about with the State coordinators and with HHS, Health and Human Services because we would like to see broader recertification training programs. There are some available in some States, so I encourage you to contact your State coordinators office, because some States do have these programs, others do not.

There are some small individual efforts. I know for training, there's one taking place in San Jose, California in the coming weeks, and through a group called Upwardly Global, which is working on placing professionals in their own field. Their funding, I know, was quite limited. But we are - many of the agencies have been talking with groups like Upwardly Global to try to expand their program more broadly for the refugees across the country.

But as you may know, right now, or may not know, the funding for refugee services across the country is completely flat. Because there's not a new budget, at the federal level, that's been approved, which will hopefully happening in March when the new administration comes in, so funding for new programs like professional recertification, in most States, is pretty limited. But it's certainly a need.

I can't talk to you really the individual agency case or services that you receive, but the professional recertification thing, I think, is the critical issue for many Iraqis. Please contact your State coordinator and know that we are - it is something that many of the agencies, and other organizations, working on behalf of Iraqi refugees are working to have implemented across the country.

**Kathleen Newland:** Thank you, thank you, caller, for bringing that up. And I'm afraid that brings us to the end of our allotted time for this call. I'd like to thank all of you, who called, very much for joining us and thanks again for all you're doing to help the Iraqi refugees resettle successful in the United States.

I'd like to say that this call was sort of an experiment on our part at IRC. And we would love to get your feedback on it. If you would like additional calls with other speakers on specific issues like how to get more help, how to deal with special immigrant visa category. If there's any specific issue where you feel a call like this would be helpful, please let us know.

The person to contact at IRC for follow-up here on any of your queries is Nathaniel Hurd. Nathaniel's information - contact information is on the original notice you got inviting you to join this call. But let me just give you his telephone number and his e-mail. His phone number is area code 202-822-0166 extension 45. And you can e-mail Nathaniel at Nathaniel, Nathaniel, that's N-A-T-H-A-N-I-E-L.H-U-R-D@their.org. So we thank you for your participation. If you'd like to participate in more calls like this, please let us know. Until the next time. Goodbye.

**Male:** Thank you.

**Operator:** Thank you. Once again, everyone, that does conclude today's teleconference. We do appreciate your participation, you may disconnect at this time.

[end]