INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

Skill, Career and Wage Mobility Among Refugees: Understanding Refugees' Transitions into Higher-skill, Higher-wage Work as a Lens to Inform Effective Workforce Development Policies and Practices in the U.S.

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This paper was authored by Erica Bouris, Ph.D. Erica serves as a Technical Advisor for Workforce Development for the International Rescue Committee's Program Quality and Innovation Unit. The paper was prepared for Association of Public Policy Analysis and Management Annual Meeting, Nov. 8-10, 2018, Washington, D.C. The views expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to the International Rescue Committee, its board, or its funders.

I. Refugees and Career Advancement: A Critical Question in 2018 for Refugees, Practitioners and Policymakers

In the past five years, several developments have occurred that push a fresh interest in the question of how we can support refugees in the U.S. refugee resettlement program to enter and progress in their careers. First, since 2017, there has been an unprecedented attack on the U.S. refugee resettlement program. Refugee admissions have tumbled from a high of 85,000 just a few years ago to fewer than 25,000 arrivals in FY18. Executive orders and other administrative decisions have drastically impacted overall refugee arrivals in the United States and especially those from some of the most conflict-ridden regions of the world, including Syria. While the U.S. refugee resettlement program had long enjoyed bipartisan support and was seen as a critical humanitarian program, it is now the frequent target of partisanship. Dialogue about the economic costs of refugee resettlement has increased, particularly the arguments that refugees are a drain on public resources and are slow to integrate and achieve economic self-sufficiency.

Second, in 2014 there was a significant overhaul to the central piece of federal legislation that guides the American public workforce development system. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) came into being, replacing the previous Workforce Investment Act (WIA). WIOA increased emphasis on how the public workforce system can better serve those with the most barriers to employment, including immigrants, recipients of public benefits, English language learners, and basic skill deficient adults—all categories that overlap with the refugee population in many ways. Several states have taken additional steps, developing state workforce development plans that explicitly mention refugees, require greater amounts of collaboration between refugee resettlement organizations and workforce development boards, and/or explicitly recognize refugees as falling into the WIOA category of "dislocated worker," all of which help streamline access to more intensive supports through the public workforce system.

Third, America continues to undergo a demographic shift. The American workforce is becoming more diverse—more than 17% of workers are immigrants and immigrants are overrepresented in some of the fastest growing jobs in the country, including home health aides and service sector jobs. In California, home to the largest workforce in the U.S., nearly 40% of workers are immigrants.[1] In short, it is no longer possible to think about workforce development practices and policies without thinking about how well these practices and policies work for immigrants and English language learners. While refugees represent a tiny fraction of the American workforce, the lessons we learn from helping to upskill refugees from low-wage, low-skill jobs into higher-skill, higher-wage jobs have the potential to contribute to these larger questions that are central to America's continued economic growth and prosperity.

Taken together, these developments—a refugee resettlement program under attack at least in part because of representations that refugees are economic "takers" not "contributors"; elements of progressive reform in federal workforce development legislation; and a rise of the role of immigrants in the American workforce—present a compelling reason to investigate the question of how best to help refugees move into higher-skill, higher-wage jobs.

[1] Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics accessible via www.bls.gov. See recent summary report at https://www.bls.gov/news.release/forbrn.nr0.htm/Labor-Force-Characteristics-of-Foreign-Born-Workers-Summary

The goal of this paper is not to answer this question definitively—that is, it is not an investigation of a specific intervention model, nor does it take a comprehensive look at all of the strategies, practices, programs and policies that are aiming to do this work. However, it does aim to draw out some key issues that should be addressed as research, policy and practice in this area advance. The paper does this by drawing on three distinct data sets from the International Rescue Committee's (IRC) work in this space. It aims to shed light on critical questions such as what type of refugee is opting in to this type of program—and what type of refugee is not opting in? What are they achieving? What are they not achieving? What is the refugee experience with these programs and how can their perspective help us think through program models, strategies and policies? What do the staff think about what works and what is challenging? How might this too inform our program models, strategies, and policies?

Finally, this paper presents some learnings drawn from what these data sources, collectively, tell us about supporting refugees in moving into higher-skill, higher-wage jobs. It then extends these learnings into some initial reflections on how this could inform broader workforce development policies to ensure that refugees—and in important ways, immigrants and English language learners as well—have meaningful, accessible, responsive opportunities to prepare for jobs that offer economic mobility.

II. IRC and Career Programs: Bringing a Practitioner Perspective and Multifaceted Data into the Conversation

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) operates in 25 cities across the U.S., offering a continuum of services to refugees and other vulnerable, low-income community members. As a part of this work, IRC operates workforce development programs designed to prepare individuals for jobs and to support them in achieving career success and lasting economic independence. A subset of these workforce development programs are known internally as career programs. Career programs at the IRC have the goal of moving adults into higher-skill, higher-wage jobs. The basic program model includes:

- Soft-skills training
- Contextualized basic skill training as required
- Opportunity to earn an industry-recognized credential
- Individual employment coaching
- Supportive services
- Direct job placement assistance

Throughout this paper, the term "IRC Career Programs" will be used. It should be recognized that this term means a program that contains the six program components listed above and has, as its primary goal, the goal of supporting an individual in moving into a higher-skill, higher-wage job. However, the implementation of these programs on the ground looks quite different across IRC locations. There are differences in terms of industries of focus; inclusion of additional program components such as mentoring; the scope and type of supportive service resources; whether the program directly pays for credential and certificate programs; the length of time and scheduling of programs; the role and type of local partners; the balance between individualized services and classroom-based training; staffing models; and the specific requirements of the funders supporting the work. So while the term is a helpful conceptual framework to understand this type of refugee employment services as distinct from "early employment" programs such as

Matching Grant and Refugee Cash Assistance (which are focused on helping refugees find a first job quickly), and while it can be helpful in drawing boundaries around minimum program components and goals, it also presents limitations. In particular, a different type of analysis would be needed for a more granular understanding of how well specific program models or approaches work. That is outside the scope of this paper.

The analysis below draws on three distinct data sources:

- Program data from IRC career programs in 16 cities collected over a 14-month period between August 2017 and October 2018, (*Section III*)
- Survey data (semi-structured interviews) collected from 40 IRC career program clients during the spring of 2018 (*Section IV*)
- Interviews with 14 IRC staff implementing career programming in 13 different cities conducted in October 2018 (*Section V*)

Taken together, this data helps paint a multifaceted picture of those served by IRC career programs and an early look at what these programs are achieving. Further, it illuminates how clients experience these programs and what they (along with IRC staff) think about the journey to higher-skill, higher-wage jobs.

III. Learning from IRC Career Programs Data

In 2017, the IRC began standardizing the collection of client demographic and outcome data from career programs across the IRC's U.S. network. Prior to 2017, many programs were collecting this type of data but there was little standardization. While this is still an emerging data set and one with critical caveats, it also provides an important lens into career programming serving refugees and helps shed light on who is being served and what they are achieving.[2]

This analysis included enrollments in IRC career programs that occurred during a 14-month period (Aug. 1, 2017–Sept. 30, 2018). During this period, IRC career programs enrolled 651 clients at 16 offices. Of these, 98.6%were foreign-born with refugee or refugee-like status.[3] The remaining analysis will focus on this client population (642 total individuals).

Key Demographics

In all offices, IRC's career program model is an "opt in" model, meaning that clients choose to participate. Unlike many refugee early employment programs, there is no sanction for not participating, nor are there cash payments associated with participating. With this in mind, it is helpful to look at the demographics of refugees choosing to "opt in" to these services.

Country of Origin. Clients enrolling in career program services at IRC during this time period came from 61 countries, with the following countries comprising five percent or more of the total

[2] Four main caveats are: understanding the meaning and limitations of the term "IRC Career Programs" as described in detail in *Section I;* acknowledging that these services are not uniformly available across geographies or service providers, which constrains interpretation of data surrounding "opting in"; recognizing the absence of a randomized control group to compare enrollment patterns or outcomes; and understanding the issues regarding ongoing/active clients who may not yet have achieved specific outcomes, as described further in footnote 8.

[3] This includes refugees, asylees, asylum seekers with work authorization, parolees, special immigrant visa holders (SIVs), and victims of trafficking.

enrollment: Afghanistan (25.1%), Iraq (10.1%), Democratic Republic of Congo, or DRC (9.4%), and Eritrea (7.6%). There are a few points to consider in regard to these percentages. First, most IRC career program clients do not enroll immediately after arrival (as discussed later), so assessing these percentages relative to FY18 refugee arrivals is not particularly helpful. Taking a wider arrival window—for example, five years back—is more useful. Second, the relative overrepresentation of participants from Afghanistan, Eritrea and Ethiopia, and the underrepresentation of refugees from the DRC as well as Burma and Bhutan, is notable.[4] However, significant caution in interpreting this data is critical. In many cases, location of a career program and the population(s) that have settled there are key factors determining who accesses the program. For example, the IRC has robust career programming in Sacramento, Calif. (home to the highest concentration of Afghan SIVs in the U.S.), and Silver Spring, Md. (proximate to Washington D.C. and a high concentration of asylees from Eritrea and Ethiopia), but it does not have a presence in Pennsylvania (a state with a large Bhutanese refugee population). Fundamentally, context matters tremendously in assessing country of origin data and who is "opting in" to programs. Looking at only one provider in certain locations is, at best, a very partial picture of which refugee groups are deciding to "opt in" to this type of programming.

Gender. Women comprised 43.6% of clients enrolling in IRC career programs during this time period. In recent years, women and girls have typically comprised slightly less than half of refugee arrivals in the U.S. There is significant data that shows that adult female refugees in the U.S. are less likely to be placed in a first job soon after arrival as compared to men; further, they are less likely to be working even five years after arrival. Thus it is notable that women are choosing to "opt in" to these services.[5]

Level of Education. Overall, IRC career program clients enrolling during this time period were significantly more likely to have higher levels of education as compared to the overall adult refugee population at the time of arrival.[6] Nearly half (49.1%) had university education or post-secondary technical training, 33.0% had completed secondary school, 11.6% had completed intermediate schooling or less, and 6.3% had an unknown level of education.

[4] See WRAPs data for FY18 and historical refugee arrival data by country of origin, accessible via http://www.wrapsnet.org/
[5] 2016 Report to Congress https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/arc_16_508.pdf
[6] 2016 Report to Congress https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/arc_16_508.pdf

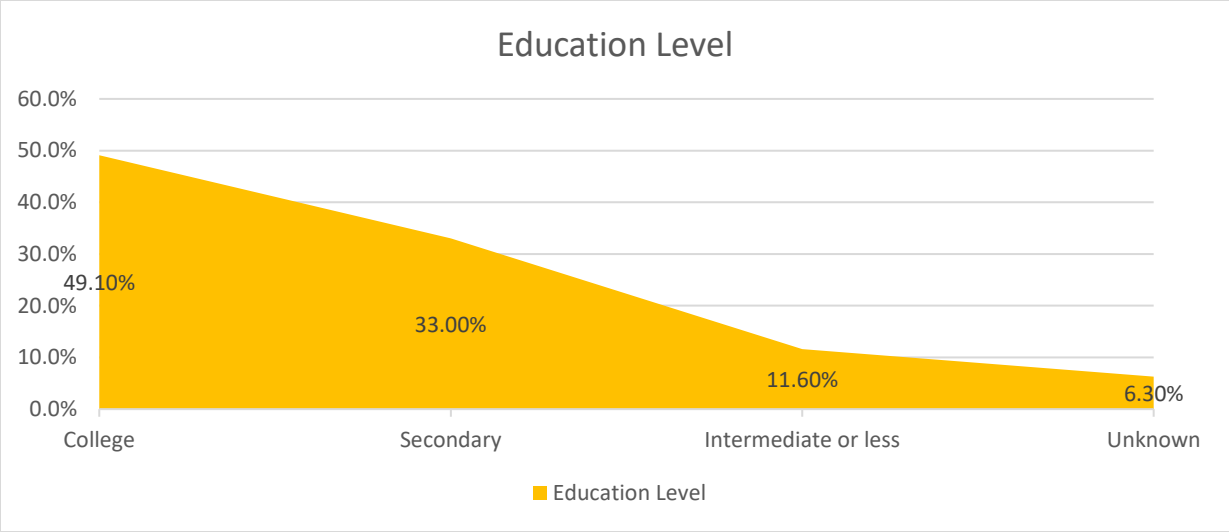

FIGURE 1—EDUCATION LEVEL AT INTAKE FOR IRC CAREER PROGRAM CLIENTS

Age. The average age of clients during this time period was 33 years old at the time of enrollment. This means that participants on average could expect to work more than 30 years and contribute significantly to local economies as well as benefit from increased earning power.

Date of arrival. One-third (33.3%) of IRC career program clients enrolled during this time period had arrived in 2015 or earlier and the majority had been in the U.S. at least one year prior to enrolling in career program services.

Employment Status at Time of Enrollment. Nearly three out of four clients (69.5%) were working at the time of enrollment into an IRC career program. Those working at time of enrollment earned on average of $12.56 an hour. In nearly all of the communities where the IRC implements career programming, this wage falls short of a living wage.

Cash Assistance. At the time of enrollment, 32.6% of clients were accessing some type of direct cash assistance, with TANF being the most common type..[7] The presence (or absence) of cash supports can influence a client's overall economic stability and opportunities to devote time to training; it may also directly influence whether other supportive services such as subsidized childcare or transportation assistance is accessible.

Outcomes of IRC Career Program Clients

Looking at who accesses IRC career programs provides a starting point to consider questions of access and interest, both of which are critical in building responsive programs, practices and policies, topics further explored in *Section VII*. At this point, it is helpful to take an initial look at the types of outcomes these clients have achieved during this 14-month period.[8]

[7] This does not take into account non-cash benefits such as SNAP and Medicaid.
[8] It is important to note that because IRC career program models do not have a uniform, specific time period for service provision, the data presented on enrollment in credential programs and job placements includes clients who are still active and may well complete these steps—they simply have not done so yet. For example, a client that enrolled in August 2018 may be starting a training program in November 2018, which would not be reflected here. Further, a client who enrolled in June 2018 and started a four-month training program in August 2018 would still be active in training and not yet have started job search. The IRC has recently adopted a uniform procedure to "exit" clients when they have completed their engagement with career programs. Looking ahead, IRC will be able to

Enrolling in training programs that result in earning an industry-aligned credential. Two-thirds (66%) of clients enrolled in career programs during this time period had enrolled in a credential or certificate program at the time of this analysis.[9] The types of credential programs varied widely but nearly all were short term (most less than six months) and offered through community colleges, career technical education providers, and other training institutions. The most common programs included those in allied health care (Certified Nursing Assistant, Medical Assistant, Pharmacy Technician), transportation and logistics (commercial driver's license, forklift), and customer service management. Others included certifications in welding, apartment maintenance, childcare/early childhood development, Quickbooks, CompTIA, and web design. Of clients enrolled in a credential or certificate program during this period, 54.3% had already earned their credentials, with most remaining clients were still engaged in their training programs.

***Leveraging Resources to Pay for Training*.** More than half (52%) of clients benefited from the IRC directly paying for a training program, while a little less than a quarter (23.1%) accessed other forms of scholarship assistance, usually with IRC assistance. On average, the value of this financial assistance was $1,509 per client.

Employment. More than 200 clients enrolled in IRC career programs during this time period were also placed in employment during this time period. The average wage at placement was $15.95, more than 25% greater than the average baseline wage at intake. There was significant variation by sector as well as geography. In instances where data was available, the majority of jobs (84.5%) were related to the training the client had pursued.[10] Many clients were still active in training and services and had not yet transitioned into job search.[11]

IV. Client Voice: Listening to IRC Career Program Clients

In the spring of 2018, the IRC conducted an in-depth survey of career program clients with the goal of better understanding refugees' experience of participating in career programming. The focus of this survey was not on client outcomes per se, but rather it was a qualitative effort to understand client experiences, perceptions and thoughts on the process of trying to move into a higher-skill, higher-wage job.

Methodology

The IRC chose to use a quota sampling approach and was able to identify clear, mutually exclusive client characteristics that could be used to develop a representative sample group. These variables included geographic location, gender and national origin. IRC completed 40 surveys which represent 6.1% of the clients served during a 27-month period (January 2016–March 2018). *Figure 2* below shows the presence of variables in the total client population and the surveyed population.

examine these metrics from the perspective of "exited" clients, separate from clients that are still ongoing and active in the program.

[9] See above footnote.

[10] This data field was subject to significant missing data, with more than half of job placements missing this data.

[11] See footnote 8

	Total Career Programs Client Population (Enrolled 1/2016–3/2018)	Surveyed Population
Office		
Atlanta	16.8%	18.9%
Baltimore	4.3%	2.7%
Boise	4.1%	0%
Charlottesville	3.8%	5.4%
Dallas	Less than 1%	0%
Oakland	3.7%	5.4%
Richmond	6.0%	5.4%
Sacramento	5.9%	8.1%
Salt Lake City	2.4%	2.7%
San Diego	25.0%	18.9%
San Jose	1.8%	2.7%
Silver Spring	25.8%	29.7%
Nationality		
Afghanistan	20.1%	27.0%
Iraq	14.4%	10.8%
Ethiopia	12.6%	13.5%
U.S.	8.0%	0%[12]
Democratic Republic of Congo	7.0%	5.4%
Other	61.8%	43.2%
Gender		
Male	61%	65%
Female	39%	35%

FIGURE 2—KEY VARIABLES IN CAREER PROGRAM CLIENTS AND SURVEYED CLIENTS

Figure 3 shows other key demographic characteristics of the surveyed population; note that these variables were not attended to while building the quota sample but are provided here for context.

[12] While the IRC's career program does serve U.S.-born adults, for the purpose of this survey, the IRC chose to focus only on refugee adults.

	Total Career Programs Client Population (Enrolled 1/2016–3/2018)	Surveyed Population
Average Age		
	34	33
Educational Attainment Prior to Enrollment		
Less than secondary	8.5%	5%
Secondary	36.4%	37.5%
Post-secondary	55.4%	60%
Year of Arrival[13]		
Arrived in 2014 or earlier	35.1%	32.5%
Arrived in 2015 or later	64.9%	67.5%

FIGURE 3—ADDITIONAL VARIABLES AS PRESENT IN THE CAREER PROGRAM CLIENT POPULATION AND SURVEYED POPULATION

In order to conduct the survey, the IRC employed a semi-structured interview tool which included 11 questions. This approach was chosen because of its ability to capture nuanced, client-driven narratives in a manner that still allowed for thematic coding and analysis. The interviews were conducted over the telephone and, in general, each interview took 15-20 minutes to complete.

Findings and Analysis from Career Programs Client Survey

Job Level. Most clients identified their career goal as obtaining employment in a "middle-skill" job, commonly understood to be a job that requires some type of vocational or post-secondary education but not a four-year degree.

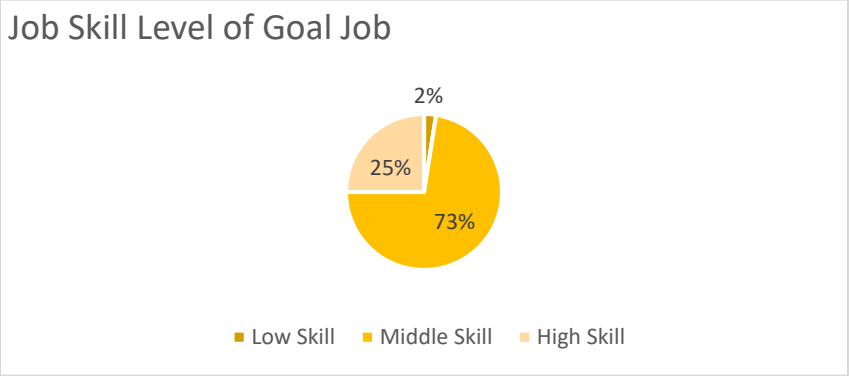

FIGURE 4 – JOB SKILL LEVEL OF GOAL JOBS AMONG SURVEY RESPONDENTS

For some, the goal of achieving a middle-skill job represented a significant achievement, one that had not been imaginable in the past.

> *I am a professional truck driver…I drive to all 48 states…. I never imagined I would be a professional truck driver… the CDL [commercial driving license] test was hard. I will make*

[13] Excludes native-born American participants of career programs.

more than $40,000 this year, and in two years, I will buy a house. —Somali male, Atlanta, Ga.

For others, their success at obtaining a middle-skill job was countered by frustration that it might not lead to the higher-skill job they wanted and, in some cases, had had back home.

I was an electrical engineer back home.… I am working as an electrician but my certifications don't translate.… I want to do project management of electrical engineering projects. —Afghan male, Silver Spring, Md.

There were some notable gender differences, with twice as many men (31%) as women (14%) identifying a high-skill job as their ultimate goal, but generally, both men and women identified a middle-skill job as their goal.

Continuity Between Past Careers and Current Career Pathway. A majority of those surveyed (75%) were not specifically trying to resume a prior career, though some (37%) were pursuing careers related to the general industry in which they worked back home. A significant percentage (38%) were pursuing entirely new career pathways, either because they did not have a clearly defined career path before coming to the U.S. (owing to age or circumstance) or because they saw real opportunity in their selected career pathway in the U.S. context.

There was significant diversity among those surveyed in how they choose their career pathways. Many clients relied heavily on the IRC along with input from friends, family, the internet, and even popular culture and the media. IRC staff were the most frequently cited source of information and guidance (65% of those surveyed specifically mentioned the IRC).

I used Google, talked to my friends, Aisha [IRC career program coordinator], and my college advisor to pick this career.… I didn't do it back home but it was always a big interest of mine. —Ethiopian male, Atlanta, Ga. on pursuing an IT certification and an office administrative career

Working Adults. Unlike while they were engaged in employment services immediately post-arrival, most of the refugee participants surveyed were working at the time of enrollment in career programs. This presented significant challenges to respondents, with a full 70% of those surveyed identifying balancing the demands of work and career skills training as "difficult," Those surveyed were often balancing a full plate of work, family responsibilities, pressures to earn income, and a need to attend classes and other skills training activities.

As shown in *Figure 5*, more than half of respondents were primary wage earners while participating in career programs.

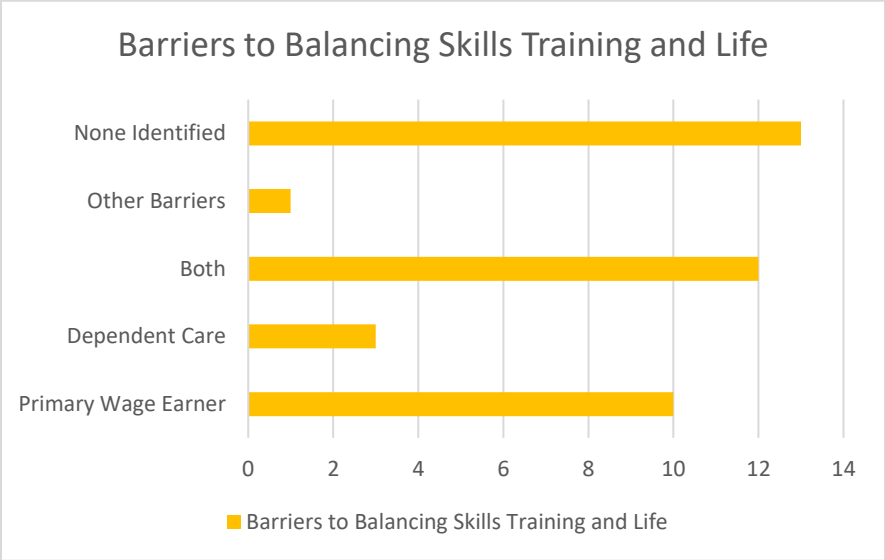

FIGURE 5 – BARRIERS TO BALANCING SKILLS TRAINING AND LIFE AMONG SURVEY RESPONDENTS

There were interesting gender differences, with 62% of men identifying as primary income earners compared to 42% of women. Women however, reported shouldering more dependent care barriers, with half reporting that they had dependent care responsibilities compared to 31% of men.

> *It is hard, I have to work a lot of night shifts while in school and it is a hard job for very little money.* —Iraqi female, San Diego, Calif.

Skills Training. One of the key components of IRC's career programming is helping clients participate in industry-aligned skills training. The majority (83%) of those surveyed were either enrolled in or had already completed a skills training program. There were several notable findings related to skills training, including information on the types of educational navigation and support that clients received, as well as their reflections on the strategies they used to pay for this skills training.

Most clients (64%) said the IRC had helped them enroll in skills training and several noted the extent of this assistance—for example, help with learning about the registration process, assistance filling out forms, translation support (especially in regard to technical terms), etc. Others (31%) completed the enrollment process themselves, although more than half of these clients still noted that they had received assistance from an IRC staff member when they were identifying the type of training they wanted. There were no notable differences by gender in the above findings.

> *IRC did everything—they made it so easy.* —Iraqi female, Baltimore, Md.

The cost of skills training programs varies widely by field and local community. As shown in *Figure 6*, the majority of surveyed clients were able to access training at no cost, either because

the IRC paid for the training (with scholarship or grant funds), or because the training was delivered at no cost.[14]

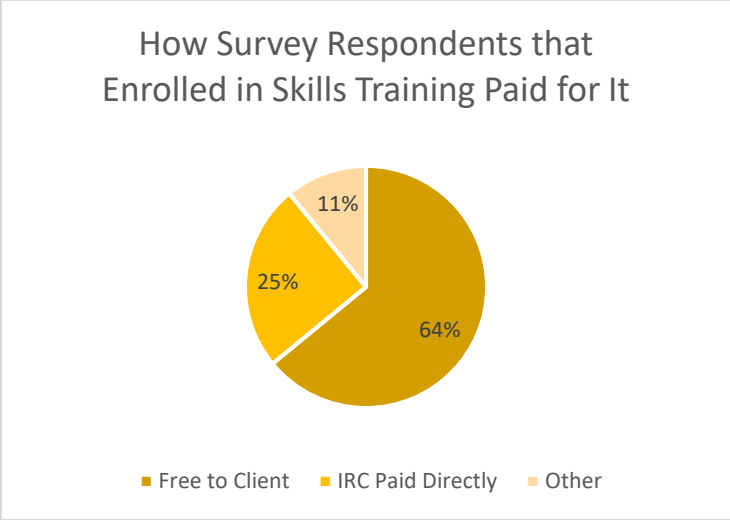

FIGURE 6 – HOW INTERVIEWED CLIENTS ENROLLED IN SKILLS TRAINING PAID FOR IT

Experience with Work. As noted earlier, the majority of participants (68%) were working at the time of enrollment and most (90%) were working at the time the survey was conducted. Of those working, 67% labored in the industry that they had identified as their industry of interest, and most were in middle-skill jobs. Just over half (53%) said they found their jobs primarily through their own self-directed efforts, with 37% identifying assistance from IRC as the main factor in securing work.

As shown in *Figure 7*, survey respondents used a wide variety of strategies to secure employment, including the IRC, online searches, on-site visits with employers, using other resources such as family and friends and community-based resources.

[14] While outside the scope of this survey (client experiences of career programming), it should be noted that many of the "free" skills training programs were actually IRC partnerships engineered to allow no-cost access to clients; from the client perspective, they were simply "free."

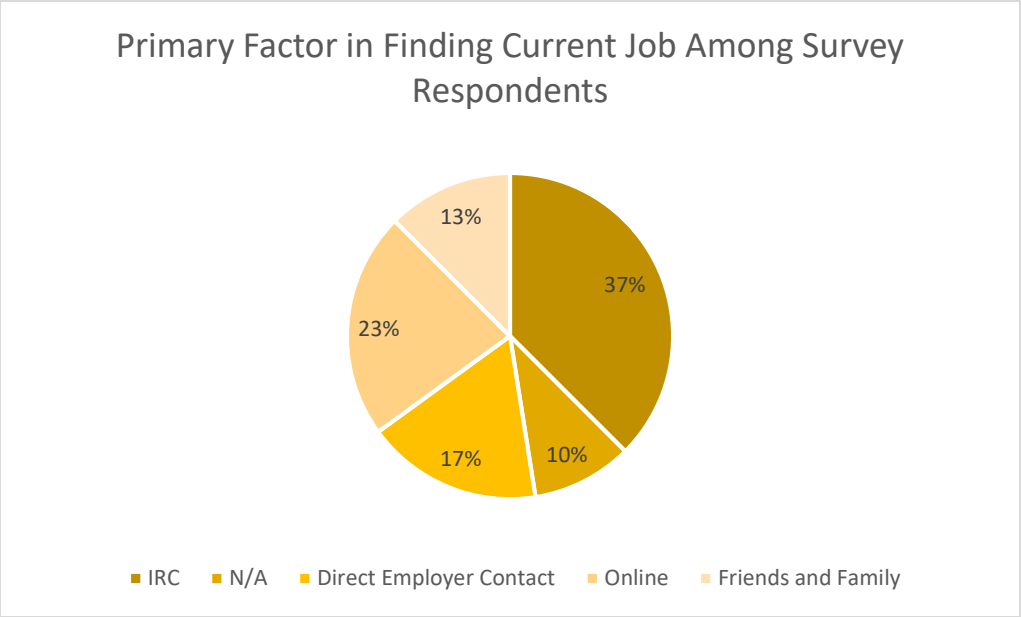

FIGURE 7 – PRIMARY FACTORS IN FINDING CURRENT JOB AMONG SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Challenges and Difficulties. Earlier it was noted that the majority of those surveyed were balancing the pursuit of a higher-skill, higher-wage job with other responsibilities, including work and dependent care responsibilities. In analyzing additional themes that fall under the broad category of "challenges," what was particularly striking is how individualized each set of challenges was. There were overarching themes—for example, balancing work, dependent care responsibilities, and skills training—but fundamentally, each client seemed to be working through a unique conglomeration of challenges. Six main themes were identified and are illustrated with client quotes below.

- Balancing significant work and dependent care responsibilities

I am the only one working, my mother is disabled and my sister is too young to work…but I am doing the surgical tech training at the same time [as working]. It is OK and I am excited, but sometimes I am just tired. —Iranian female, San Jose, Calif.

I haven't finished my [Microsoft Office] certifications yet because my work hours are crazy…just such crazy hours. —Nigerian female, Sacramento, Calif.

- Limited financial resources

The money…. Really it is just the money that is hard. It is hard to have money while you are doing a training, like the welding. —Eritrean male, Baltimore, Md.

I am supporting my wife and children…they are still in Nairobi…plus I have to pay rent, everything, here…. I have to do training and working together. —Congolese male, Charlottesville, Va.

- Difficulty choosing a career

It was difficult to decide to do the new career path…to change…but now, because of IRC's help, it's good. —Ethiopian male, Silver Spring, Md.

It is difficult to know, to decide, what really I should do in the future. —Eritrean female, San Diego, Calif.

- Absence of a local network or connections and a perception that this is what was holding them back

I completed the dialysis technician training and even [though] I was a nurse back in Afghanistan, but it is very hard to find a job.… I need more help to get the connections with the hospitals. —Afghan male, Silver Spring, Md.

I just need to meet the right employer or person…one who knows what I have and knows he can trust me. —Syrian male, Atlanta

- Discrimination and discouragement

So many worries…people don't like Africans here, money is always a problem.… I don't know, my friends don't know, what would even be a good job in America. —Congolese male, Charlottesville, Va.

I don't get any response when I apply for jobs, even though I have experience…the Career Center worker told me people don't hire refugees to work in office jobs. —Iraqi female, San Diego

- Perceived need for a degree or specific licensure but being unsure – or unable – to progress in that area

I think I need a GED to really get ahead, even though I am doing the [training] for health, I can't really go far or do more in college until the GED but it is hard. —Burundi female, Salt Lake City, Utah.

I have the electrical engineer certification from my home and the university…but I can't get hired in America without the special licenses. —Afghan male, Oakland, Calif.

What Supports Were Most Helpful? More than half of the respondents (53%) identified IRC staff as the most helpful resource in preparing for and moving into a higher-skill, higher-wage job. Respondents noted that IRC staff helped them learn about career options and new industries, assisted with enrollment and payment for training, and helped with networking and job searches. Over one-fourth of respondents identified other supports as "most helpful" and those responses were varied, ranging from a free laptop to assistance from a friend to personal strengths and skills including the discipline to save money to pay for training and self-identified English language and networking skills.

V. Service Provider Voice: Listening to IRC Staff Implementing Career Programming

In October 2018, interviews were conducted with 14 IRC staff from 13 offices (representing 81% of offices offering career programming at that time). The staff interviewed were primarily direct-service staff (79%) who work on a daily basis implementing career programming but included some (21%) who exercised additional supervisory roles. The goal of the interviews was to gather staff perspective on what is important in moving refugees into higher-skill, higher-wage jobs and what are the challenges in doing so. Further, the interviews were designed to draw out staff reflections on what refugees themselves consider important and challenging. The interviews were focused on five primary questions:

- From your perspective, what is most important in moving a refugee into a higher-skill, higher-wage job?
- What do you think career program clients view as most important in moving into a higher-skill, higher-wage job?
- From your perspective, what is the biggest difficulty or challenge in moving a refugee into a higher-skill, higher-wage job?
- What do you think career program clients view as the biggest difficulty or challenge in moving into a higher-skill, higher-wage job?
- From your perspective, what stands out about the clients who are successful in moving into higher-skill, higher-wage jobs?

These interviews yielded several interesting findings, as described below.

What do IRC staff think is most important in moving refugees into higher-skill, higher-wage jobs? Staff responses to this question were notable for their diversity. Factors identified included IRC career coaching and support, clients understanding or internalizing certain realities about the process, access to the right types of training, personal attributes of refugees themselves, and external systems and landscapes (e.g., training providers, employers). Forty-three percent of respondents identified some version of IRC career coaching as critical, though these reflections were nuanced: for example, one respondent identified IRC staff's role in "keeping them moving through the obstacles that come up, the many steps that must be taken," while another emphasized the role that IRC staff play in "helping them navigate the system to connect to a training that makes sense for them." Also notable, 21% identified an external system or partner (e.g., training providers, employers) as key, highlighting the fact that transitioning refugees into higher-skill, higher-wage jobs is not something that either refugees or refugee service providers can do alone.

What do IRC staff think refugee clients perceive as most important in moving into a higher-skill, higher-wage job? These responses had less diversity than the staff's personal reflections; further, these responses were not closely aligned with what IRC staff perceived to be most important. Nearly three-fourths of respondents (71%) felt that clients believed that certificates and credentials were of primary importance. One respondent noted that "they really want certificates that can be earned quickly," and another noted that sometimes "it seems like they don't even have a plan…they just think it is important to collect certificates." Twenty-one percent of respondents expressed that they felt that refugees viewed networks and connections as the most important thing in moving into -higher-skill, higher-wage jobs. As described by one respondent, refugees "think IRC has magic tools and connections to help them…getting IRC staff to use these tools is the most important thing in getting into a better job."

What do IRC staff think are the biggest difficulty or challenge in moving a refugee into a higher-skill, higher-wage job? IRC staff responses to this question were again notable for their diversity and included balancing demands of work, training and life responsibilities;, practical barriers such as transportation and child care; external job market factors such as low pay and poor job quality in middle-skill jobs and competition from native-born Americans; lack of cultural competency and high-level professional communication skills; and a dearth of accessible, high-quality trainings designed for English language learners. More than a third (36%) mentioned the difficulty of pursuing training while also holding down a job and balancing life responsibilities; three respondents explicitly noted that it is not just about finding the time but "whether a client really wants to prioritize training." Twenty-one percent specifically noted issues related to a lack of sufficient knowledge and skills in navigating American work culture and professional communications, giving examples of clients not understanding email etiquette, not understanding how to navigate conversations about advancement in the workplace, and just consistently "falling short" on really understanding these subtle but critical aspects of career growth.

What do IRC staff think refugee clients perceive to be the biggest difficulty or challenge in moving a refugee into a higher-skill, higher-wage job? Here again respondents often evoked the importance of networks and connections. More than a third (36%) of respondents said they believe clients perceive their lack of "the right network, the right connections" as their biggest challenge. Practical barriers were also a theme, with 29% citing transportation and/or child care as what clients perceived to be the biggest barriers. Two respondents (14%) noted that clients perceive their biggest challenge to be the simple fact that they literally do not know where to start; both used similar language in describing this topic, noting that "they come in and say I don't even know what to Google," and "I don't know what the job words are for my field…or the positions…or where even I should start to look or what internet search to do."

The final question asked respondents to reflect on successful clients—those who had transitioned into higher-skill, higher-wage jobs and were doing well. Responses to this question were striking for their uniformity—93% specifically noted personal characteristics and attributes of clients. Key descriptors included motivation, personal responsibility and ownership, persistence, determination, flexibility, follow through, and an ability to hear and absorb feedback.

VI. Key Learnings and Themes

Assessing the three data sets together, several key learnings and themes emerged. Six of these learnings and themes are summarized below.

Refugees looking to upskill are working adults and, as such, have specific needs. Each of the three data sets highlighted the prominence of this issue: enrollment data shows that most IRC career program clients are working at the time of enrollment; client survey data showed how common and challenging the juggle between work and upskilling is; and IRC staff frequently cited how constraints on time and difficulty prioritizing training while working make preparing for higher-skill, higher-wage jobs challenging. Of note, it is not just juggling work and training but the nuance and complexity of this juggle - dependent care arrangements and child-care subsidies that fluctuate; the absence of a car or the need to share a car is an ongoing concern; frequent night shifts and last-minute schedule changes pose disruptions; pressure to take overtime when offered because of financial need; and for English speakers, additional roles

as community navigators and interpreters for multiple family members - all add to the challenge of finding the time and resources to pursue additional training.

Skills training matters. While this may seem an obvious statement, it is an important one. Most refugee employment programs—the kind that are deployed in the first months post-arrival—do not have a technical or occupational skill component. They consist of direct job placement assistance and limited employability or work readiness classes. IRC career program data shows that the majority of refugee participants are embracing skills training as part of their efforts to move into higher-skill, higher-wage jobs. Demographics of the adult refugee population reinforce this—most do not have post-secondary education and most jobs in the U.S. require some type of post-secondary education. Client survey information showed that refugee clients recognize that they do not necessarily have the credentials or certifications necessary for the U.S. job market (this is true among those with post-secondary education as well as those who do not have post-secondary education). While interviews with IRC staff suggest that they frequently think clients put a very heavy emphasis on earning certificates and credentials, they also acknowledge that it is important for clients to pursue education and credentials that will strengthen their job-market skills.

Skills training is not enough. Each of the three data sets suggested that skills training alone is not the answer to refugee career advancement. Even the relatively basic data points captured in IRC career program enrollment and outcome data show that refugees are accessing individualized assistance in navigating training options and are relying on IRC support in paying for training. The client interviews reveal that clients themselves articulate other needs they have – not being sure how to even begin figuring out what a good job might be in their community, needing support registering for classes and navigating that whole process, wanting assistance connecting with employers as their networks frequently do not include any inroads to promising industries, needing direct job placement assistance, and more. IRC staff were even more direct in explaining the importance of community-based support, identifying the role they play in helping to set expectations, supporting refugees in exploring specific career pathways, teaching soft skills and professional communication, and keeping clients motivated and on track through the many steps they must complete on their journey to a higher-skill, higher-wage job.

Refugee career programming intersects with middle-skill jobs in particular. As shown in both the IRC career programs data as well as the client survey, most clients focus on middle-skill jobs. The demographics of refugee arrivals in terms of educational attainment and skill level—especially the fact that in recent years, most adult refugee arrivals have a secondary education or less—helps explain this concentration on middle-skill jobs. Indeed, this focus may be particularly important in ensuring equitable career programming that serve all refugees, not just those with university-level education and professional backgrounds.

While outside the scope of this analysis, macroeconomic factors are also likely at play. Nationally, it is predicted that 48% of job openings between 2014 and 2024 will be middle-skill jobs, a higher percentage than either low skill (20%) or high skill (32%).[15] Many workforce development initiatives across the U.S. have a strong orientation toward these middle-skill jobs, and as refugee career programming is developed in communities, it is not surprising that there

[15] See https://nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/2017-middle-skills-fact-sheets/file/United-States-MiddleSkills.pdf

would be alignment with these broader efforts, especially given the demographic factors identified above.

Sometimes there is a gap between what refugees perceive they need most and what practitioners perceive refugees need most. The juxtaposition of the client survey data and the staff survey data is particularly illuminating in this regard. Clients frequently focused on issues related to credentials and certifications as well as a strong focus on "connections" and "the right network." In contrast, IRC staff tended to emphasize a more diverse mix of issues such as the need to help refugees understand the local career context, the need for skill building that includes but is not limited to occupational training and certifications, the need for high-quality local partners, and the need for effective strategies for prioritizing training while balancing other demands. Further, above all else, IRC staff identified the need for refugees seeking to move into higher-skill, higher-wage jobs to possess certain personal characteristics such as motivation, persistence and flexibility.

More data is needed about decisions to "opt in" to career programming, especially in terms of country of origin, level of educational attainment, and gender. Together, the three data sets were suggestive of themes that need exploring in a more robust manner. In particular, it is important to better understand whether current program models are equally effective in reaching, enrolling and serving diverse refugee groups, as the initial data presented here suggests there may be unevenness across participation in these programs and this warrants further research.

VII. Implications for U.S. Workforce Development Policy

The analysis, learnings and themes that emerged in reviewing the three IRC data sets suggest several areas where policy can play a role in shaping a landscape where effective programs serving refugees can thrive. Six recommendations are presented below.

Intentionality at the federal, state and local level in aligning refugee practices and policies and workforce development practices and policies. Historically, refugee service providers have often operated largely outside of the federal, state and local workforce development policy and practice community. Numerous factors have contributed to this. First, distinct funding streams originating in different federal agencies are a factor, with many refugee employment service providers primarily utilizing funding from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within Health and Human Services (HHS); in contrast, the U.S. workforce system is primarily connected to funding from the Department of Labor (DOL) and aligned with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Second, the performance-oriented, WIOA-aligned workforce system has not always been focused on or accessible to English language learners, as these "harder to serve" populations were sometimes perceived to represent a risk to achieving WIOA performance metrics. Third, the structure of the Reception and Placement (R&P) Cooperative Agreement that guides refugee resettlement in the U.S. has created a tight community of refugee resettlement organizations (currently there are nine contracted to provide refugee resettlement services); this community sometimes has contributed to a lower level of cross-system program development, despite requirements for regular consultations across many systems. Finally, the early self-sufficiency model that is a part of the federal refugee resettlement program encourages a strong focus on "first jobs" for refugees, and the funding is generally tied to this early period of service and job placement; in contrast, the

public workforce system—and especially the career pathway frameworks of the last two decades—can seem like initiatives that have limited direct alignment.

In order for refugees to experience career and wage growth post-resettlement, it is important to align refugee employment practice and policy with workforce development practice and policy. In designing interventions and advocating for policy, refugee employment stakeholders should consistently look toward resources, practices and policies under WIOA to ensure that to the extent possible there is alignment of outcomes, leveraging of resources (especially training funds), and collaborative projects that braid together the population-specific expertise of refugee-serving organizations with the resources (monetary and otherwise) of the public workforce system. Fundamentally, there are limited resources available for refugee employment services, and these funds are often limited to the first months or few years post-arrival. Most of these resources focus on helping refugees secure a first job, and there are even fewer resources for programs that help refugees move into higher-skill, higher-wage jobs. In order to realize the goal of helping refugees experience career advancement and upward economic mobility, alignment and collaboration between these two systems is necessary.

Policymakers within the refugee services realm should consider mandating a greater level of collaboration specifically with state and local workforce development boards, including and extending beyond the existing refugee quarterly consultation process that happens in local communities with refugee resettlement programs. Workforce development policymakers should continue movement toward requiring greater accessibility of all types of workforce development services for English language learners (especially WIOA Title I services which offer the best access to skills training) and should ensure consistent accountability in reaching and serving this population. The reauthorization of WIOA in 2014 made key strides in this area. However, given the decentralized nature of the workforce development system, much of the effectiveness of these policies hinges on state and local stakeholder actions (including the actions of contracted service providers) and consistent accountability at this level.

Middle-skill Jobs. Many refugees are preparing for middle-skill jobs. Given the projected shortages in qualified candidates for middle-skill jobs across the U.S., it is important to think about strengthening alignment between refugee employment programming and workforce development strategies to address labor shortages in middle-skill jobs.

Policymakers should consider integrating specific strategies for engaging English language learners in middle-skill job training programs, including supporting the development of bridge programs and earn-and-learn models as described below.

Expanding access to "bridge" programs of all kinds. Most refugees arrive with basic skill deficiencies, including English and, in many cases, other deficiencies that stem from a limited formal education. The gap between the skill level of an English language learner who has completed intermediate school abroad and the skill level required to begin many training programs offered through community colleges, vocational training providers and apprenticeship programs is significant and acts as a barrier, keeping refugees in low-skill, low-wage jobs. Bridge programming—the kind that include contextualized vocational ESL and other basic skills as well as career exploration—can help ensure that refugees are able to prepare for, enter and succeed in the skills training necessary for career advancement. Many refugees also need to earn a GED or high school equivalency degree, and bridge programs that integrate this option can be beneficial. Bridge programs are particularly important to ensure equity of access to

career programming for all refugees, as without these types of programs, it is likely that refugees with lower levels of formal education and weaker English skills (often the largest group within adult refugee arrivals) will be underrepresented in skills training programs.

Policymakers should consider increasing funding for bridge programs, incentivizing the development of community-based bridge programs that integrate CBOs with proven track records with specific populations, and resourcing the piloting and evaluation of models that offer greater accessibility to low-wage shift workers with variable schedules. They should also consider ways to integrate "earn and learn" models into bridge programming so that financially vulnerable adults are better able to participate in them.

Expanding "earn and learn" programs and ensuring accountability around engagement with diverse populations. In recent years, "earn and learn" models have gained traction among federal workforce development policymakers; in particular, there has been a noted push to expand apprenticeship programs. This has included a focus on nontraditional industries as well as on growing employer-sponsored apprenticeship programs. Certainly, the need for income is paramount for most refugee new American families, and opportunities to participate in paid training programs can be a powerful way to enable these individuals to upskill and have a measure of financial stability at the same time. As a program model, "earn and learn" programs offer a good option for refugees looking to move into higher-skill, higher-wage jobs.

Policymakers should consider ways to ensure that these programs—across industry sectors—are meaningfully accessible to diverse populations. There is a long, well-documented history of the challenges that women and people of color have faced in entering apprenticeship programs in certain industries, and it is important for policymakers to continue to focus on strategies to hold apprenticeship programs accountable for hiring and retaining diverse candidates. In addition, policymakers should consider ways to incentivize more transparent, streamlined on-ramps to apprenticeship programs, many of which still have opaque procedures for testing, interviewing acceptance into these programs.

Strengthening meaningful roles for community-based providers. The public workforce development system currently mandates a basic level of engagement with community providers as a part of the WIOA planning process, as well as through seats on the workforce development board.

Policymakers should consider expanding guidance on the role of community-based providers so that their expertise with specific populations can be leveraged along with their capacity as service providers. At the state and local level, this could mean requiring substantive, funded community-based partners in proposals for WIOA-funded services, including the operation of American Job Centers and developing workforce development board subcommittees that elevate the voice of community-based providers.

Resourcing costs beyond skills training. While skills training costs will always be central and significant for an individual moving into a higher-skill, higher-wage job, there are clearly other resources that are needed to ensure that he or she is able to consistently participate in skills training. Both refugee employment services programming and WIOA services currently recognize this need and allow for the provision of supportive services (including provision of items such as bus passes and work clothes). Frequently, these supportive services are capped at a few hundred dollars per person.

Policymakers should consider strategies to more generously and creatively resource these supportive services, especially as pertains to child care and transportation. In particular, policymakers should work to better align the implementation of federal child-care funds such as the Child Care and Development Block Grant with workforce development programming, and ensure that "benefit cliffs" for subsidized child-care eligibility do not incentivize low-wage workers to stay in low-wage jobs but rather pursue skills training. In terms of transportation, policymakers should look beyond the basic strategy of providing subsidized public transit passes as the one-size-fits-all solution to transportation barriers. In many American communities, commuting to work (which may be at odd hours outside of the operation of public transit operations), obtaining child care and entering a training program are feasible only if a person has a car. Policymakers should consider ways to encourage Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) and other mission-oriented financial service providers to offer low-interest car loans, and workforce development administrators could consider strategies to use supportive service funds to support a variety of transportation costs, including those incurred through car ownership.