

A conversation with Becca Heller, July 6, 2016

Participants

- Becca Heller – Director, International Refugee Assistance Project
- Alexander Berger – Program Officer, U.S. Policy, Open Philanthropy Project

Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Becca Heller.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Ms. Heller of the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) as part of a grant update. Conversation topics included IRAP's policy priorities, funding situation, and staff recruitment.

Policy priorities

Special Immigrant Visas

IRAP had been advocating for the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) to increase the number Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) available to Afghani and Iraqi citizens who had supported U.S. operations in those countries. Historically, the Senate has strongly supported the SIV program, and IRAP had been hoping the Senate would consider amendments on the floor increasing the number of SIVs. However, when the bill was introduced on the Senate floor, an unrelated amendment was proposed by Senator Mike Lee, and in order to deny a vote, the Senate invoked cloture, which led the NDAA to be passed without any amendments.

While Ms. Heller was disappointed that the NDAA did not increase the number of SIVs available, she believes that the number will eventually be increased through some other legislation. In its recent foreign operations bill, the Senate approved an appropriation for the processing of 4,500 SIVs. This number might be slightly reduced as the bill passes through the House of Representatives. Alternatively, the SIV allowance could be increased in a standalone bill.

Currently, roughly 10,000 individuals are awaiting SIVs. The State Department approves approximately 4,000 each year, and has never approved more than 4,000 in a given year.

"Priority one" refugee referrals

IRAP was recently granted authority to make "Priority one" (P1) category referrals to the U.S. Department of State's Refugee Program. It submitted the first set of 16 cases three weeks ago, and has not yet received a response. IRAP hopes that these cases will establish precedents for future referrals. As this is a new procedure, it was unclear what form the referrals should take, and it is possible that some iteration will be required.

P1 referrals can be prepared relatively quickly and are an appropriate task for law students. IRAP took on approximately 620 individual refugee cases this year; if a greater proportion were P1 referral cases, it could increase this number.

Refugee Point is involved in a similar type of referral program, but works directly with the U.S. refugee program coordinator in Kenya rather than using the P1 channel.

Family reunification

The current family reunification program allows resettled refugees to petition for reunification with immediate family members who are nationals of 24 designated countries. IRAP is advocating for changes in two areas:

1. According to a 2004 memo, the petitioning family member must have been recognized as a refugee. IRAP proposes allowing anyone legally in the U.S. to file a petition. This change could affect a significant number of individuals.
2. Currently, petitioners can only include unmarried children under 21 years of age in their application. IRAP proposes expanding this to include unmarried children of any age.

Individuals resettled under the family reunification program are not counted against the cap on annual refugee admissions set through the presidential determination process.

Access to counsel

There are two main legal steps in the refugee resettlement process:

1. Refugee status determination by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – Applicants are guaranteed access to counsel during this step.
2. Resettlement interview – Access to counsel is not guaranteed during this step.

In the long run, IRAP would like to see access to counsel guaranteed during the resettlement interview. In the mean time, IRAP is working with UNHCR to ensure access to counsel for Syrian refugees undergoing a hybrid hearing process in Turkey and Lebanon.

Private sponsorship

IRAP has been developing a proposal for a private sponsorship model with the Niskanen Center, Refugee Council USA (RCUSA) and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI). The topic of private sponsorships is expected to be on the agenda of two upcoming global forums: the UN General Assembly Meeting on Refugees and Migrants and the Concordia Summit. It is likely that an official proposal will emerge sometime in the fall.

Fundraising

IRAP expects to have raised approximately \$2.2 million by the end of its fiscal year in August 2016. It has received a number of grants from individuals and smaller foundations. While IRAP does not expect to receive any other large grants this fiscal year, it is in ongoing discussions with some potential large funders.

Staffing

IRAP's new National Security Policy Associate began working remotely this month, and will transfer to the New York office in September 2016. His focus areas will include SIVs, security checks, and national security.

IRAP's new Communications Manager began working in June 2016, and is focusing on the areas of policy, development, and social media.

IRAP is close to hiring its new Policy Counsel.

*All Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at
<http://www.openphilanthropy.org/research/conversations>*