
Erica Bouris, Ph.D.
Technical Advisor, Workforce Development
International Rescue Committee

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In the past five years, several developments have occurred that push a fresh interest in the question of how we can support refugees resettled under the U.S. refugee resettlement program in entering and progressing in their careers. First, since 2017, there has been an unprecedented attack on the U.S. refugee resettlement program. Refugee admissions has tumbled from a high of 85,000 just a few years ago to less than 25,000 arrivals in FY18. Executive orders and other administrative decisions have drastically impacted overall refugee arrivals in the U.S. 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 and increasingly, there is dialogue around the economic costs of refugee resettlement and in particular, the argument that refugees are slow to integrate and achieve economic self-sufficiency and are a drain on public resources.

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). Under WIOA, there is 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” which can 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. In short, it is no longer possible to think about workforce development practices and policies without thinking about how these practices and policies work for immigrants and English Language Learners. While refugees represent just 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 core to America’s continued economic growth and prosperity.

Taken together – 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 – presents a compelling reason to investigate the question of how best to help refugees move into higher skill, higher wage jobs.

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 help draw out some key issues that should be addressed as research, policy, and practice in this area advances. It 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 programs – 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 that are delivering these programs think about what works and what is challenging and 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 Multi-Faceted 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 sub-set 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 industry(s) 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 the program, the role and type of local partners, the balance between individualized services and classroom-based training, staffing models, and the specific requirements of the funder(s) 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 further, it is 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 during a 14-month period (August 2017-October 2018); this includes programs operating in 16 cities (Section III)
- Survey data (semi-structured interviews) collected from 40 IRC career program clients collected during the spring of 2018 (Section IV)
- Interviews with 14 IRC staff that currently implement career programming in 13 different cities; conducted in October 2018 (Section V)

Taken together, this data helps paint a multi-faceted picture of who IRC career programs is serving 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 doing this work – think advances and limits success in achieving the end goal of a higher skill, higher wage job.

III. Learning from IRC Career Programs Data

In 2017, IRC began standardizing the collection of client demographic and outcome data from career programs across the IRC’s US 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 that has some 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 (August 1, 2017-September 30, 2018). During this time period, IRC career programs enrolled 651 clients across 16 offices. Of these, 98.6% were foreign-born with refugee or refugee-like status.³ The remaining analysis will focus on that client population (642 total individuals).

Key Demographics

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

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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,” the absence of a randomized control group to compare enrollment patterns or outcomes, and the understanding the issues regarding ongoing/active clients who may not yet have achieved specific outcomes yet, 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.
**Country of Origin.** Clients enrolling in career program services at IRC during this time period came from 61 countries with the following countries of origin all comprising five percent or more of the total enrollment: Afghanistan (25.1%), Iraq (10.1%), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (9.4%), and Eritrea (7.6%). Viewed through the lens of how these percentages compare to overall refugee arrivals in the U.S., there are a few points of note. First, (as discussed later) most IRC career programs clients do not enroll in the program immediately after arrival so assessing these percentages relative to FY18 refugee arrivals is not a particularly helpful metric as refugees arriving in FY18 are generally accessing early employment programs. Taking a wider arrival window, for example five years back, is more helpful. With this as a point of comparison, notable is the relative overrepresentation of participants from Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, and the underrepresentation of refugees from the DRC as well as Burma and Bhutan. However, significant caution in interpreting this data is critical as in many cases a key factor in who accesses a program is the location of the program and which population(s) have settled there. So for example, IRC has robust career programming in Sacramento, California (home to the highest concentration of Afghan SIVs in the U.S.) and Silver Spring, Maryland (proximate to Washington DC with a high concentration of asylees from Eritrea and Ethiopia) but does not have a presence in Pennsylvania (a state with a large Bhutanese refugee population). Fundamentally, context matters tremendously in meaningfully assessing country of origin data and who is “opting in” to programs and 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 and further, even five or more years post-arrival they are less likely to be working, so it is notable that women are choosing to “opt in” to these services.

**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. 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.

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4 See WRAPs data for FY18 and historical refugee arrival data by country of origin, accessible via [http://www.wrapsnet.org/](http://www.wrapsnet.org/)
FIGURE 1 – EDUCATION LEVEL AT INTAKE FOR IRC CAREER PROGRAM CLIENTS

Age. The average age of enrollees during this time period was 33 years old at the time of enrollment. This means that participants on average had more than 30 years ahead of them in their working lives and significant opportunities to contribute 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%) was working at the time of enrollment into an IRC career programs. For those that were working at the time of enrollment, their average wage at intake was $12.56. In nearly all of the communities where IRC is implementing 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 of cash assistance being received. 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 is accessing IRC career programs provides an initial landscape from which to think about questions of access and interest which is critical in building responsive programs, practices, and policies – topics that will be further explored in Section VII. However, it is helpful to round out this analysis with an initial look at what types of outcomes these clients have achieved during this 14 month period as well.

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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
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. The types of credential programs varied widely but nearly all were short-term (most less than 6 months) and offered through community colleges, career technical education providers, and other training institutions. The most common programs included those in allied healthcare (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 those that enrolled in a credential or certificate during this time period, 54.3% had already earned their credential with the majority of the remaining clients still engaged in their training program.

Leveraging Resources to Pay for Training. More than half (52%) of clients benefited from IRC directly paying for a training program while others (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 that were 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, representing an average that is 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. Many clients were still active in training and services and had not transitioned into job search yet.

IV. Client Voice: Listening to IRC Career Program Clients
In the spring of 2018, 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 intentionally not on client outcomes per se, but rather 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
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: 1) geographic location; 2) gender; and; 3) national origin. IRC completed 40 surveys which represents 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.

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. IRC has recently adopted a uniform procedure to “exit” clients when they have completed their engagement with career programs and looking ahead, will be able to look at 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 9
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FIGURE 2 – KEY VARIABLES IN CAREER PROGRAM CLIENTS AND SURVEYED CLIENTS

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

<sup>12</sup> While the IRC’s career program does serve U.S. born adults, for the purpose of this survey, IRC chose to focus only on refugee adults.
In order to conduct the survey, 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 a career goal to obtain employment in what could be described as a “middle skills” job, commonly understood to be a job that requires some type of vocational or post-secondary education that falls short of a four-year degree.

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

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13 Excludes native-born American participants of career programs
However for others, while they had succeeded in getting a middle skill job, they expressed frustration that it may not lead to the high skill job that they truly 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

There were some notable gender differences, with twice as many men (31%) as women (14%) identifying a high skill job as their ultimate goal though still, both men and women were most frequently identifying 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 career from back home, though for some (37%) the career they were pursuing was related to the general industry that they had worked in 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 in how those surveyed selected their career pathway. Many clients relied heavily on 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 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 on pursuing an IT certification and an office administrative career, Atlanta

**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.

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

**Skills Training.** One of the key components of IRC’s career programming is helping clients participate in industry-aligned skills training and 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 clients received, as well as their reflections on the strategies they used to pay for this skills training.

Most clients (64%) cited that the IRC had assisted them with enrolling in skills training and several respondents noted the intensity of the assistance provided, which, for example, included help with learning about the registration process, assistance filling out forms, providing translation support for more technical terms, etc. Others (31%) had completed enrollment processes themselves, though more than half of these clients did still identify that they had received assistance in identifying the training to enroll in from an IRC staff member. There were no notable differences by gender in the above findings.

*IRC did everything – they made it so easy.*  Iraqi female, Baltimore
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 IRC paid for the training (with scholarship or grant funds) or because the training was delivered at no cost.\textsuperscript{14}

![Diagram](image)

**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 who were working, 67\% were working in the industry that they had identified as their industry of interest and most were in a middle skill job. Just over half (53\%) expressed that they found their job primarily through their own self-directed efforts, with 37\% identifying assistance from IRC as the main factor in getting the job they had.

As shown in Figure 7, survey respondents used a wide variety of strategies to secure employment including looking online, directly visiting employers, using other resources such as family and friends and community-based resources, and IRC.

\textsuperscript{14} While outside the scope of the focus of this survey (client experiences of career programming) it is notable for context that many of the “free” skills training programs that clients referenced were actually programs that IRC had specifically engineered partnerships with in order to afford no-cost access to clients; from the client perspective however they were simply “free.”
Challenges and Difficulties. Earlier, it was noted that the majority of those surveyed were balancing their pursuit of a higher skill, higher wage job with other responsibilities, including work and dependent care responsibilities. In analyzing additional themes that arose 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

  *I haven’t finished my [Microsoft Office] certifications yet because my work hours are crazy...just such crazy hours.*  
  Nigerian female, Sacramento

- **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

  *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

- **Difficulty deciding what career to pursue**
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

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

- 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, 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

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 office

- 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

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

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

What Support(s) 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. The ways in which IRC staff were identified as helpful varied and included reference to assistance learning about career options and new industries, assistance with enrolling in and paying for training, and help with networking and job search. 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 level staff who work on a daily basis implementing career programming (79%) but did include some (21%) that also had supervisory roles in addition to working directly to implement career programming. 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 is difficult or challenging in doing so. Further, the interviews were designed to draw out staff reflections on what they perceived refugees themselves to consider important and challenging. The interviews were focused on five primary questions:

- From your perspective, what is the most important thing in moving a refugee into a higher skill, higher wage job?
- What do you think career program clients view as the most important thing 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 that are really successful in moving into a higher skill, higher wage job?

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, a client understanding or internalizing of certain realities about the process, practical factors such as access to the right type of training, factors primarily related to the personal attributes of refugees themselves, and factors related to external systems and landscapes (e.g. training providers, employers). Forty-three percent of respondents identified some version of IRC career coaching as critical, though there was nuance in these reflections. 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” whereas another respondent emphasized the role that an IRC staff plays 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 to be most important in moving into a higher skill, higher wage job?** When IRC staff reflected on this question, it is notable that these responses had less diversity than their own personal reflections and further, that these responses were not closely aligned with what IRC staff perceived to be most important. Nearly three fourths of respondents (71%) shared that they 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 a higher skill, higher wage job. 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. Balancing demands on time when trying to balance work, training, and life responsibilities, practical barriers such as transportation and childcare, 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 were all mentioned. More than a third (36%) mentioned the difficulty of pursuing training while also holding down a job and balancing life responsibilities and 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?** In reflecting on this question, there was again continuity with the theme of the importance of networks and connections. More than a third (36%) of respondents expressed that they think clients perceive the fact that they do not have “the right network, the right connections” as the biggest challenge. Practical barriers were also a theme, with 29% citing transportation and/or childcare as what clients perceive to be the biggest barriers. While representing a small percentage of respondents (14%), it is notable that two respondents specifically noted that clients perceive their biggest challenge simply being that they literally do not know where to start. Both respondents used very similar language in describing this topic, noting that “they come in and say I don’t even know what to Google” or “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 that had transitioned into higher skill, higher wage jobs and were doing well. Responses to this question were striking for their uniformity – 93% of respondents specifically noted personal characteristics and attributes of clients. Key descriptors included motivation, personal responsibility and ownership, persistence, determination, an ability to be flexible, 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 also working make preparing for higher skill, higher wage jobs challenging. Of note, it is not just the juggle between work and training but the nuance and complexity of this juggle - dependent care arrangements and childcare subsidies that may fluctuate, the absence of a car or the need to share a car, frequent night shifts and schedule changes that often occur last minute, pressure to take overtime when offered because of financial need, serving as a community navigator and interpreter for multiple family members because the individual was the only English speaker in the household – all add up 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 also 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 and this is true among both those that have post-secondary education but also those that do not. While IRC staff interviews suggested that IRC staff 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 aligned 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 client’s 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, support 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, this is the area where most clients are focused. 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 why there is a concentration of attention 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%).

> Many workforce development initiatives across the U.S. have a strong orientation towards these middle skill jobs and as refugee career programming is developed in communities, it is not surprising that there 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 they need most.** The juxtaposition of the client survey data and the staff survey data is

15 See [https://nationalskillsoalition.org/resources/publications/2017-middle-skills-fact-sheets/file/United-States-MiddleSkills.pdf](https://nationalskillsoalition.org/resources/publications/2017-middle-skills-fact-sheets/file/United-States-MiddleSkills.pdf)
particularly illuminating in this regard. Drawing from the client survey, clients frequently focused on issues related to needing 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 included but was 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) whereas 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) which has sometime 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 - have sometimes seemed 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 towards resources, practices, and policies under WIOA to ensure that to the extent possible there is
alignment of outcomes, leveraging of resources especially around 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 get into 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
towards 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 and 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 skills 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, resource the piloting and evaluation of models that offer greater accessibility to low wage
shift workers with variable schedules, and 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 and in particular, there has been a noted push to expand apprenticeship programs. This has included a focus on non-traditional industries as well as a focus 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 and more high-quality earn and learn programs has the potential to be beneficial to refugees.

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, and being accepted 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 sub-committees that elevate the voice of community-based providers.

**Resourcing costs beyond skills training.** While skills training costs will always be a central and significant cost in supporting an individual in moving into a higher skill, higher wage job, there are clearly other resources that are needed to ensure that an individual is able to consistently participate in the skills training. Both refugee employment services programming and WIOA services currently recognize this need and allow for the provision of supportive services which can include items such as bus passes or 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 childcare and transportation. In particular, policymakers should work to better align the implementation of federal childcare funds such as the Child Care and Development Block Grant with workforce development programming and ensure that “benefit cliffs” for subsidized childcare eligibility do not incentivize low wage workers to stay in low wage jobs and further, incentivize them to 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 between work (which may be at odd hours
outside of the operation of public transit operations), childcare, and a training program is only feasible 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 that are incurred by a participant acquiring and utilizing a car.