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The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program in Austin: The Story of One Congolese Family

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The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program in Austin: The Story of One Congolese Family

by

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Report

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Abstract

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program in Austin: The Story of One Congolese Family

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In 2013, the U.S. Department of State allocated nearly $45 million to the Texas Office of Refugee Resettlement to help aid with the resettlement of 6,922 refugees. Approximately 10 percent of all refugees who were brought to the U.S. that year were resettled in Texas. Austin received 716 of those refugees.

For 30 years, the U.S.'s Refugee Admissions Programs has been providing aid and money to help refugees fleeing religious and political persecution resettle in the U.S. The program is a system of public-private partnership in which the U.S. Department of State hands out funds to local non-profit organizations to oversee the initial six months of the resettlement.

The current program is largely underfunded and is based on a self-sufficiency model that requires refugees find a job within four months of arrival setting many refugees on a path towards poverty as they are often come from conflict zones with

minimal English skills, knowledge of how the U.S. works or programs to help them use whatever skills or education they have to find better paying jobs.

This paper critiques elements of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program through the case study of one family that has recently arrived in Austin, Texas, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

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In 2006 Palaku Musongera, 59, his wife Doli, 44, their two sons, two daughters and two nephews fled the war in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo to neighboring Uganda. He left other family behind--his parents and a brother--but he felt he should take the nephews with him.

The war that had been raging for the better part of 20 years on the eastern frontier of the DRC had finally become too much for the Musongera family in their village of Lubero. Aided by the international Catholic charity, Caritas, the Musongeras and most of their 2,000 neighbors, by Palaku's estimate, abandoned their homes and took the two-day journey to Kampala, Uganda's capital.

"It was almost empty," Palaku said of the village where he was born and raised.

As soon as they arrived in Uganda, Palaku and Doli applied to be considered for refugee resettlement status with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. They asked to be resettled based on their inability to return to their home country. The Musongeras would wait five years, from 2006 to 2012, for the UNHCR to begin their resettlement. Only then were they able to apply to the U.S. for refugee status, a process that would take them two more years. When they finally reached the U.S., they had to confront a bureaucratic maze and the prospect of being dropped from public assistance after less than a year. They are making it, though, and say that life here is preferable to what they left behind in the Congo.

As of mid-2013, there were 673,339 Congolese refugees from the war in line behind the Musongeras, waiting to be resettled in 13 countries, mainly the United States, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Sweden and Norway. In fiscal year 2013, the U.S. resettled 2,563 refugees from the DRC. That number is changing for 2014. Congress

approved up to 70,000 refugees to be resettled in the U.S.—14,000 of whom will be from Africa. The president proposes the number of refugees that the U.S. can take as part of the yearly federal budget, which then must be approved by Congress.

More priority has gone to the Congolese because their situation is not improving, according to Mamadou Balde, refugee resettlement director at Caritas, a local Austin resettlement agency. “They’ve been sitting in refugee camps forever,” he said.

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Conflict in the DRC goes back to colonial times. The former Belgium colony has suffered on and off since Belgium’s King Leopold ran a brutal rubber trade in the late 19th century and killed millions of Congolese through forced labor. Upon gaining independence in 1960, the DRC fell into the hands of President Joseph Mobutu, who ruled the country poorly for 32 years, during which he allowed the Congo’s infrastructure to deteriorate.

The conflict across the DRC and surrounding countries, known as the Great Lakes region, has been going on since decolonization in the early 1960s. The most recent conflict was set off by a brutal war in Rwanda in 1994 that resulted in the genocide of an estimated half-million Rwandans over two weeks. One million Rwandans fled over the border to the DRC, where they created armed rebel groups under Mobutu and caused a humanitarian crisis along the eastern border of the DRC.

Two years later, dictator Laurent-Desire Kabila overthrew Mobutu, which led to the first Congolese War, lasting from 1996 to 1997, followed by a second Congolese War from 1998 to 2003. An estimated 5 million died across both wars, and clashes have

continued since. Nearly 18 years of conflict have run down the eastern part of the mineral-rich country and have affected mostly minority tribes.

Palaku first noticed the violence in his village in 1997, during the first Congolese war. His village is in North Kivu province along the Ugandan border. It is one of the most conflicted areas in the country.

“We’ve seen so many things. We’ve seen killings, a lot of things,” said Palaku, a short man with dark eyes and a hard face that makes him look younger than 59.

Like the Musongera family, more than 450,000 Congolese have fled and remain in neighboring countries like Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda, according to the U.N. High Commission. The area’s been called one of the most dangerous places in the world for women. According to a U.N. report, more than 200,000 women have been raped, and 39 percent have experienced some kind of sexual violence.

When the Musongera family arrived in Uganda, the UNHCR presented them with two options while they waited for resettlement: They could stay in the refugee camps on the border or live in Kampala, the capital city. The camps could provide the family with food, shelter and healthcare, but the city would have none of that—only the family’s security was guaranteed. The Musongeras chose Kampala.

“I wanted my kids to get some kind of education,” said Palaku, who worked as a high school teacher in the DRC. The schools in the camps weren’t as organized as in the city, he said, and quality education for his children was important to him and Doli, also a high school teacher.

In Kampala, Palaku and Doli found jobs collecting water bottles off the street to sell to a local paint factory. Palaku found some work teaching, his passion. The family

moved from apartment to apartment as finances waxed and waned, and the children attended local schools, studying and improving their English as the parents wished. During their time in Uganda, Doli gave birth to two more girls, bringing the number of children to eight--six children of their own and the two nephews.

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In 2014, the UNHCR has given priority to DRC refugees in this region. In 2012, about 6,598 submissions, or 42 percent of all resettlement submissions from Africa, including the Musongeras, came from the DRC, according to a UNHCR report. For all African submissions, 59 percent of them are sent to the U.S., the country with the largest resettlement program.

For the DRC and surrounding countries, the U.S. government relies on the UNHCR to recommend refugees for resettlement. The commission has had its eyes on the displaced Congolese for years, but coming up with a resettlement plan was difficult, said Kelly Gauger, deputy director for refugee admissions at the U.S. Department of State. Because the Congolese fled across the region to Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania, the UNHCR needed a plan for the region to avoid a mass influx of Congolese into these four countries.

It wasn't until 2012, more than 10 years after the beginning of the conflicts along the DRC's eastern border, that the UNHCR concluded the displaced Congolese weren't going home, and started a resettlement plan targeting the four neighboring countries. That's when families like the Musongeras were able to apply for resettlement.

In 2013, seven years after their arrival in Uganda, the family, after undergoing multiple interviews, health checks and background checks, was approved for resettlement

in the United States. They would resettle in Austin, Texas, if they wanted to resettle in the U.S., having no choice in the matter.

On July 1, they boarded a plane in Kampala to begin their 40-hour journey. They flew from Kampala to Dubai, and Dubai to New York, where they spent several hours going through U.S. immigration, before they finally arrived in Austin. The night of July 2, they were picked up by a member of Refugee Services of Texas, one of the local Austin resettlement agencies assigned to oversee the family's case for the first six months. He brought them to their apartments, off of state Highway 290, that had been equipped with furniture and food by the resettlement agency.

The next day, with help from Refugee Services, the family headed to the Social Security office to begin the registration process. On paper, the Musongera family had just officially escaped Uganda and become U.S. residents, but the integration into their American lives was just beginning.

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In 2013 the U.S. took in 66,065 refugees—2,592 of which were from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, according to the Department of State.

Texas has the largest refugee resettlement program in the U.S., taking in more than 10 percent of all refugees. In 2013, it took in 6,922 refugees, followed by California at 5,904 and Michigan at 4,125. Houston, one of the largest resettlement cities in the U.S., received the most for all Texas cities at 2,108 refugees. Austin received 716.

Texas gets lots of refugees because of its economy, according to the State Department's Gauger.

"Texas is a great place for refugees. We have found a lot of communities in Texas very welcoming. The cost of housing tends to be low. Jobs are available," said Gauger.

The U.S. government defines a refugee as someone who is forced to live outside of their country of origin or residence and is unable or unwilling to return to it because they will be imprisoned, tortured or murdered based on factors like their race, religion, nationality, and membership in a particular social or political group.

Misconceptions arise on the differences among refugees, asylum-seekers and immigrants. Those seeking asylum are asking for legal status based on grounds of persecution, and immigrants voluntarily leave their home country to move to the U.S. without a legal reason to be considered refugees or asylum-seekers.

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program differs from those who immigrate or request asylum in that the U.S. works with refugees to get them resettled instead of just granting them legal status to stay in the country. The program partners with the UNHCR on selection of refugees, as well as health screenings and background checks through the Department of Homeland Security. Once refugees are accepted, contractors like Refugee Services take over the local resettlement process.

The process is lengthy. According to Gauger, it takes 18 to 24 months for the U.S, not including the time refugees sometimes wait for the UNHCR, to recommend refugees for resettlement.

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Palaku and his family waited for seven years in Kampala. They spent five years waiting for the UNHCR to determine that they were unable to return to the DRC and then recommend them to apply to the U.S. for refugee status—the only way that

Congolese refugees are able to apply for resettlement in a third country. The Musongeras then spent two years going through the U.S. refugee application process.

Once refugees arrive in the U.S., the Department of Health and Human Services is responsible for handing out assistance such as food stamps and Medicaid for the first eight months after their arrival. Contractors handle most of these duties.

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program is a public-private partnership, one that often crosses the line between church and state. The State Department contracts out resettlement duties to nine regional resettlement agencies, six of which are religiously affiliated. In Texas, Church World Service, an Indiana-based international Christian nonprofit, oversees refugee resettlement.

"Church is just kind of a natural community from which to draw people who may be interested in these kinds of things," said Gauger. "I think it's part of their mission, you know, welcoming a stranger, helping new people navigate the United States."

Organizations must reapply every year for their contracts, and according to Gauger, the same nine have held the contracts with the Department of State for the last few years.

She said the department looks to contract with agencies like Church World Service that are able to prove that they have significant private resources—not just cash, but also things like volunteer hours and furniture and other donated household items to give to refugees. The department looks for agencies that have a strong nationwide network of nonprofits that work in refugee resettlement. The main resettlement agencies are responsible for subcontracting out resettlement duties for individual cities. These smaller agencies are often also religiously affiliated as well.

In Austin, Church World Service subcontracts out these duties to Caritas, a local Catholic organization not affiliated with the larger Caritas International, and Refugee Services of Texas, a secular nonprofit. The local agencies do the hands-on work, everything with the refugees from the minute they touch U.S. soil. They are responsible for distributing and setting up Medicaid and grants, which come from the federal government. They pick refugees up at the airport, find them initial housing, assist with English classes, help them find jobs, enroll their kids in school and distribute initial resettlement funds.

The Musongeras' case was assigned to Refugee Services, and when they arrived, a French-speaking member of the organization greeted them. They were taken briefly to the agency before being brought to their initial furnished and stocked apartments off of the highway. Refugees Services had to rent two apartments instead of one because of the family's size and the lack of affordable three-bedroom apartments. The one- and two-bedroom apartments in opposite corners of the large complex became home to the family for the first six months.

The Musongeras are among the 50,000 Congolese the U.N. expects resettle across all host countries in the next five years. Just 464 Congolese were resettled in Texas last year, with 53 of those going to Austin, but figures from the U.S. Department of States suggest that's about to change.

For fiscal 2014, which runs from October 2013 to September 2014, the Department of State has approved up to 70,000 refugees--14,000 of which will be from Africa. For Texas, 7,843 refugees total will be resettled there. Austin, the fastest growing city in Texas, will take 802.

The federal government has allocated $310 million for fiscal 2013 to the Refugee Admissions Program. Nearly $45 million of that will go to the Texas Office of Refugee Resettlement, which distributes most of the funds to Church World Service. But $2 million goes to grant programs targeting refugees, the largest being the Refugee School Impact grant, a $972,000 grant divided among Texas school districts to help them aid refugee students. Including all funding sources, just over $2 million is divided among the Texas counties of Bexar, Dallas, Tarrant, Harris, Potter and Travis, all of which take in refugees.

Today's Refugee Admissions Program was based on the Refugee Act of 1980, pushed by the late Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts and signed into law by President Ronald Reagan. Previously, the U.S. had only taken in refugees fleeing communism or repression in Middle Eastern countries, but the Refugee Act opened the program to the world as well as establishing the ground rules for today's program. According to the Department of State, the program has resettled over 3 million refugees from 105 countries since 1980.

For fiscal 2012, the U.S. admitted 15,000 refugees of Nepali origin who were facing persecution in Bhutan, followed by the Burmese at about 14,000 and then Iraqis at about 12,000.

The U.S. has interests in the DRC, according to Michael Schatzberg, professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He said there are three main ones. Economically, the DRC has a wealth of minerals—it holds a third of the world's cobalt, a tenth of its copper and a lot of lithium, a mineral used in smartphones. Politically, the U.S. fears that the conflict will continue to cross borders into other

African states and that political instability could be an attractive hideout for international terrorists.

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From the viewpoint of refugees like the Musongeras, it's a matter of getting somewhere safe, and it just happened to be the U.S. that accepted them.

"Folks leave war zones for very real and concrete and obvious reasons," said Schatzberg. "Where they come is usually a function of where they can get to."

Like all refugee groups, the Congolese come with their own concerns beyond the typical problems that all refugees face, such as learning English, finding a job and continuing their education.

The Musongera family represents a typical Congolese family—at 10 people, it is large.

It's common for Congolese families to have to nine or 10 people, said Mamadou Balde, refugee resettlement director at Caritas in Austin. Finding affordable three- and four-bedroom apartments is becoming challenging with rising rents in Austin, she said.

Often large families are broken into multiple apartments, as the Musongera family was. For their first six months in the U.S., Palaku, Doli and their four daughters stayed in a two-bedroom apartment, and their two sons and two nephews lived across the complex in a one-bedroom apartment.

The families often consist of many children, and often the children are not biological. They can be the children of other family members or neighbors whose parents were caught in the conflict. Two of the Musongeras' boys are nephews. Their parents are still in the DRC.

In Congolese culture, it's typical for the village to raise a child, and this can make childcare in the U.S. difficult.

"They are from what I call an open society," said Balde. "In the Congo, they can leave their children with the neighbor to run out, or leave their children to run around unsupervised, and they come here with that mentality."

After their first six months in the U.S., Palaku and Doli, with the help of their resettlement agency, decided to move the family to a three-bedroom apartment in another part of town to save $600 a month in rent. However, the parents said they were shocked and panicked when they thought that the youngest girls' new school didn't have an after-school program. Palaku called the refugee support specialist for the Austin Independent School District, who found a program that would allow the girls to stay late.

A major concern with the Congolese is trauma. Because of the high rate of violence and sexual assault in the DRC, many Congolese women are expected to have been assaulted, according to Erica Schmitt, director of Refugee Services in Austin.

Austin and Dallas are home to the Center for Survivors of Torture, the only clinics in Texas and among the only ones in the country that address refugee mental health issues. Their funding comes from grants from the U.N. and the state Office of Refugee Resettlement. The rest is from private donors and businesses. Services are free to refugees who have been in the country for less than five years.

The Austin clinic is the busier of the two offices, according to Russ Adams, interim clinical director of the center.

He estimates that most refugees who relocate here need counseling, most often for post-traumatic stress disorder because of the violence in the eastern DRC.

“They’re basically going through the experience of having to leave a country, even if they’ve been given permission, even if they’ve been granted refugee status,” said Adams. “They’ve been in really awful conditions.”

“They’ve all seen horrendous things,” said Sarah Stratham, founder of the Multicultural Refugee Coalition in Austin, who grew up in the DRC. “Some of them have been shot, raped, their villages burned behind them, and they ran on foot to get out of the country and lived in refugee camps.”

Adjusting ends up being difficult for many Congolese, who often have high expectations for the U.S.

“They expect better housing. They expect more help,” said Lu Zeidan, director of Interfaith Action of Central Texas, or iAct, the agency that runs the state’s largest local English as a second language program. “They have a lot of mistaken views of the U.S. You know, all you have to do is walk in to the U.S., and you’re rich.”

The Musongeras quickly found out help was limited.

The federal Refugee Admissions Program is based on a self-sufficiency model. The idea is, once refugees get here, they are expected to start learning English and find a job within months. Cash assistance and Medicaid cut off at eight months.

“Unlike some other resettlement countries that support refugees for years and years with social welfare programs, that sort of thing, subsidized housing, that doesn’t exist here in the United States. People really need to come and get on their feet pretty quickly,” said Gauger of the State Department. She added that “frankly, that the Congolese do that pretty well.”

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For Palaku, the first seven months have been a struggle. On track with the U.S program, he and his wife found jobs three months after their arrival as housekeepers at hotels. They began to work full time at 40 hours a week for $8 an hour.

The first paycheck from a DoubleTree Hotel, where Palaku works, shocked him. He was unfamiliar with the American tax system, which automatically deducts taxes from his checks. He expected to make $320 a week, but with taxes taken out, it was down to $260. He estimates he makes about $1,050 a month, and his wife the same, for a total of $2,100 a month to support the family.

The Department of State requires that subcontracted agencies spend $925 per person initially. This covers rent, furniture, food and basic necessities. After that, refugees get cash assistance, food stamps and Medicaid for the first eight months. In Texas, refugees are enrolled in either Refugee Cash Assistance, which comes from federal funds, or a federal matching grant program that gives local agencies $2 for every dollar they raise from private donors.

Refugee Cash Assistance lasts for four months, with the possibility of a four-month extension based on income. For the first four months, payments cannot exceed $1,196 a month for one refugee, with an additional $418 for each family member. From five to eight months, total payments cannot exceed $1,579 for one refugee, and it increases $552.75 for each additional family member. Rules also require that refugees search for jobs.

Matching grants last for four to six months, depending on when the refugees find work. Refugees receive $200 a month per adult and $40 a month per child, plus the rent.

According to Schmitt of Refugee Services of Texas, refugees are given the choice of the two aid programs.

The U.S. program aims to get refugees employed within four months of arrival. As with the Musongera family, benefits like Refugee Cash Assistance and matching grants are usually cut off by six months. Medicaid lasts eight months.

In February 2014, the family moved into another apartment in the North Lamar area, north of the University of Texas campus, with three bedrooms and rent of $1,020 a month, not including utilities, to save money. The family is saving nearly $600 a month in rent, but Palaku remains unsure of how he's going to handle the bills once support from the resettlement agency runs dry.

In March 2014, seven months after their arrival and one month after the move to the new apartment, the family's financial support, except for Medicaid, which will continue for two more months, will be cut off.

Some employed in refugee services don't think the adjustment period is long enough, especially considering hurdles like learning English and adjusting to a new culture.

Grace Hserhti, employment specialist at Refugee Services of Austin, said refugees often face financial issues because of the short period they have to become self-sufficient. Big families quickly fall into a job with a low hourly rate because those are the first available.

Peggy Robinson, family refugee support specialist for the Austin Independent School District, said the six-month limit is difficult for refugees to deal with.

“I don’t think anyone who works in [refugee resettlement] thinks it’s enough,” she said. “There are occasional sponsors like church groups, but it’s not often, and so once their six months are up, they’re either on their own, and they may sink or swim, or you are eligible for what’s called extended case management.”

Refugee Services of Texas receives extra money from the Department of State to help refugees for up to five years with employment, but it’s not nearly as much help as the first six months. It’s mainly just help with another job if the refugee is laid off and does not assist with English training, higher education or finances. For less-educated refugee groups, according to Robinson, this is not nearly enough.

Zeidan of iAct agreed that there’s not enough support. “I think it’s a horrible approach in this limited funding. That they’re only supported for four months is ridiculous because they’re setting them up for failure,” he said.

Zeidan said the federal program’s English requirement, 40 hours of training once the refugees arrive, is often interrupted by work commitments and that 40 hours isn’t enough training anyhow.

The iAct organization allows refugees to study for 12 weeks, when they are referred to other free programs such as the one at Austin Community College. Zeidan said that she’s sometimes driven refugees to other ESL programs to register them and make sure they understand where it is located.

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According to Zeidan, iAct, which employees just her full-time, along with a part-time teacher, doesn’t have the resources to track the number of hours each refugee stays in the program, or track why they leave, but she estimated that of the 350 to 450 adults

whom the organization serves every year, about 50 percent of adults complete 40 hours or more of coursework. Of the half that doesn't, she estimated that 75 percent leave for jobs—family commitments and ever-changing weekly schedules that come with jobs in the hospitality and restaurant industries also make it difficult for refugees to attend language training.

Zeidan said English is necessary for refugees to succeed, and those who don't learn it are likely to struggle. "If they don't learn English, then they can't advance, and they're the first to lose their job and then we're back to square one again," she said.

Kelly Gauger of the Department of State said ESL training is a problem, but the department has tried giving refugees extra ESL lessons in their home countries, before they come to the U.S.

Gauger said that in the early 1980s, during the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees, the U.S. provided long-term language training overseas, but had determined it did not have any measureable impact on refugee ability to integrate into the U.S. It also came down to money. She also said the department does not have the funds provide months of ESL training to every refugee abroad who's waiting to come to the U.S.

The Department of State has recently started an English language pilot program in some of the more troubled populations, like the Burmese in Thailand and the Bhutanese in Nepal The department has considered expanding that program to include waiting Congolese.

After they finished their lessons at iAct, Palaku and his wife started to attend English classes at ACC for six hours a week, but they said that as former high school teachers, their main problem has been teaching methodology. Both are fluent in Swahili,

French and Kigali, but they have trouble understanding the teacher's oral method of teaching. They said they would prefer more explanations on the board. Seven months after their arrival in the U.S., Palaku and Doli still speak almost no English.

Palaku struggles because the most common language spoken at his housekeeping job is Spanish.

English is a common barrier to refugees who have held positions that require more education in their home countries. Palaku holds a college degree in history from the DRC and worked for years teaching high school sociology, history and geography. Here, he struggles with his job as a housekeeper, and it's the same for his wife, who was a high school chemistry teacher.

"I used so much money for learning, for my education, and it's just for no reason," he said.

Palaku retains many habits of a teacher. He keeps reading glasses around his neck and puts them on while he talks. He speaks slowly and is quick to grab a pen and paper to illustrate the points he makes.

He said he hopes to learn enough English so that he can start to use his experience and degree to work a better-paying job in a field more closely related to his education. His current job is too physical and tiring, he said.

"This is a population that's been through hell and back. They're traumatized. They're exhausted," said a former official at an Austin resettlement agency who asked to remain anonymous because she still works with the agencies. "It's all about dignity, right? Having a job creates dignity, but at the same time, wouldn't it be great if they could just relax a minutes and just learn some English or really go through some

constructive job training where they actually go to the faculty every day and are paid and then trained, if we really want to have an ideal program."

She said the few Congolese refugees that came through her agency often struggled to become employed within 90 days of arrival, and those who did often took minimum-wage jobs.

"I remember sitting in many meetings with Congolese clients who are like, 'What am I supposed to do? I make $7.25. My wife makes $7.25 an hour part-time. I have eight kids,'" she said. "The number one thing is, 'How am I going to pay my rent?'"

In the U.S, employment success is measured in how many refugees obtain any full-time job within four months, which leaves many refugees who are considered "success cases" by the Department of State guidelines living below the poverty line. Things like employment progression, English language ability, and dropout and graduation rates from school are left undocumented after the first few months.

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Palaku and Doli are among the cases considered successful by federal guidelines, but both are employed in professions outside their skill set and much below their levels of education.

The family lives below the poverty line. The 2013 federal poverty guidelines state that for a family of 10, income must be $47,670 a year to be above the line. Currently the Musongeras are earning $25,200 a year after taxes. Until they learn English, they have little likelihood of earning a higher income, other than having the two 16-year-old boys and two 18-year-old boys get jobs.

Wandaka, Palaku's 18-year-old son, said that their case manager at Refugee Services recommended shortly after their arrival that he and his cousin, Pol, get jobs in a hotel or a restaurant instead of attending high school. Both boys were 17 at the time. Palaku and Doli, who were adamant that their kids attend school, refused to let them work, and Doli enrolled them in school without the help of the case manager.

"You're always hearing in America that there's a right to school. So I said, 'How?' In Uganda, as a refugee, no matter how much we were struggling, we were studying, and here I come to America, and I'm not going to school?" said Wandaka.

Wandaka said he is trying to look for a part-time job in a restaurant after school to help the family, but so far his applications have been turned down.

"No one wants to say, 'Yeah pull your kid off the after-school tutoring program because they need to go work at HEB,'" said the former refugee resettlement agency official. "But ultimately a lot of families have come to that decision."

Like many refugees with children, Palaku and Doli came to the U.S. not just for safety and security, but for the educational opportunities.

Peggy Robinson of AISD said that school is often a struggle for newly arrived refugees—especially teenagers. Though many come with previous schooling and credits, the school often doesn't recognize their credits, and teenage students are placed the ninth grade regardless of age.

Robinson is funded by a grant from the Office of Refugee Resettlement to serve as liaison between refugee families and the school district. She is in charge of the 725 refugee students enrolled at AISD schools, with a focus on those who have been here less than three years.

She said for refugee students at AISD, the most troublesome group is those who come in as teenagers with limited English skills and previous schooling. The Burmese, she said, rarely graduate from high school.

“How many kids coming in who don’t speak English, and even if they have some kind of background in school, are going to pass every course?” asked Robinson. “So the idea that you’re going to graduate as a beginner ESL student in ninth grade in four years is pretty remote.”

Robinson said Texas state competency exams like the STAAR test, given at intervals over the course of a child’s education, are difficult for refugees to pass, even with accommodations like English dictionaries and longer test times. Refugees are exempt from the STAAR test for two years after their arrival, but must eventually pass all 15 tests in subjects like math, science, English and social studies to receive their high school diplomas.

Data on actual graduation rates for refugees are hard to come by. Robinson said she’s tried to keep her own numbers, but was unable to because refugees tend to change schools a lot. The Texas Education Agency groups immigrants, asylum-seekers and refugees into one category for enrollment and graduation rates, but Robinson said that last year, 20 students who came to AISD as refugees at any age graduated high school.

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The eight Musongera children, who range from 5 to 18, had studied English at their school in Uganda to the point that they all are proficient in the language, though none of their Ugandan credits transferred. The 5- and 7-year-old girls were enrolled in a pre-K program, the 11-year-old girl was enrolled in fifth grade at a public elementary

school, and the five teenagers, one 14-year-old girl, two 16-year-old boys and two 18-year-old boys were all enrolled in the ninth grade at the AISD International School.

The school enrolls 300 newly arrived refugees and immigrants with limited English for the ninth and tenth grades between the ages of 14 and 17. The school is in Eastside Memorial High School, a regular high school in the district.

Robinson said the International School is a good start to helping newly arrived refugees learn English and assimilate, but it only addresses two grades. For pre-K to eighth grade and 11th and 12th grades, there's no similar program. The Musongeras' 11-year-old daughter, Immaculate, attends a regular public elementary school with ESL classes.

Refugee kids in other grades are placed in regular AISD schools with ESL classes. Schools often struggle to meet the needs of refugees, some of whom have had limited to no formal schooling as well as limited English skills. In a sea of other troubles, the schools are unequipped and unable to handle the needs of refugee students.

Wandaka said he and his four siblings chose to transfer out of the International School when they enter the tenth grade next year. The International School is made up of about 70 percent Spanish speakers. He said that the siblings, who make up five out of the seven students who come from an African country, feel like the school is too geared toward Spanish-speaking students and not enough towards the 30 percent of students from non-Spanish speaking nations.

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Though school is a struggle for refugees, some alternatives exist. Zeidan said iAct is setting up a GED program to help refugees who have dropped out of high school. Gary

Job Corps, located just outside Austin in San Marcos, is a U.S. Department of Labor tuition-free vocational training and GED program for people 16 to 24. Refugee Services of Texas caseworker Zarni Tun White said the agency often recommends Gary Job Corps to refugees who speak enough English.

None of these solutions addresses the ESL problems faced by students as they start school, and Gary Job Corps still requires proficient English skills, which many new refugees do not have.

Zeidan said it's hard to watch students struggle.

"They have such dreams about going to high school because they've seen films, and they think it'd be great," she said. "It takes a few months before they realize that they're crushed, and then it takes a few more months before the parents realize that the kid's not getting anywhere, and it's sad."

Robinson said educating refugee children is key to get them out of the cycle of poverty that their parents often face.

"For some people, they'll just always be in a low-wage job, and then if we don't manage to educate their children, then their children will be stuck in low wage jobs," Robinson said.

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Palaku seems to have figured this out.

"My kids might get money, but for me, I don't ever think I'll get money," he said.

He said he tells his children, "Do not do housekeeping. Those are the jobs of people who have not gone to school. …You study hard so you can get the American

diplomas so you can have the jobs affiliated with the American diplomas. I can't do that because I don't have those diplomas."

In May 2010, a team of graduate students at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs released an examination of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Their main recommendations included a longer pre-departure orientation to help prepare refugees for what to expect in the U.S., an expansion of employment services to cover programs like recertification, job training and ESL classes that teach job related vocabulary, and improvement in collecting data on the number of refugees employed and in what field, their income, the strength of their community ties, their health status, how successful they are in making social connections, and their ESL progress.

In May and December of 2013, U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, a Michigan Democrat, introduced two bills titled "The Domestic Refugee Resettlement and Reform Act of 2013." The bills call for the evaluation of the program and how the federal government defines self-sufficiency, as well as a two-year study of how to use resources to help refugees become self-sufficient.

Both bills are in committee and have not progressed. They have received no attention in the press.

"When we are doing a humanitarian effort of bringing people here, and then not giving them support, it's very ironic," said Zeidan.

The Columbia study notes that the strength of the U.S. program is that it resettles more refugees than any other country. It gives many refugees who were previously stuck a chance to start over.

In 2012, the UNHCR presented more than 74,800 refugees for resettlement consideration to nations with resettlement programs. The U.S. resettled the most at 53,053 refugees, followed only by Australia at 5,079 and Canada at 4,755, according to the UNHCR.

"It's a relief program," said the former refugee resettlement official. "We're getting them here, and we're trying to create some kind of safety in their life, and we're achieving that wildly successfully, and the State Department's done an awesome job with that."

For 2014, the UNHCR estimates that the global resettlement need is around 691,000, though many of these refugees will never be resettled in third countries.

One factor in determining refugee success in the U.S. goes back to the religious influence in the program's public-private partnerships.

Zarni Tun White, a case manager at Refugee Services of Texas, said she tries to pair incoming families with churches. The church community can give refugees some extra support while assimilating.

The Musongera family is Catholic and tries to attend church every Sunday if school and work permit. They have found other Congolese families who help them out by giving them rides. A local church threw them a Christmas party and solicited toys and clothing to give to the children.

Another important characteristic of the Congolese is that they stick together and take care of each other as a community, said White.

"They're strong people. They're determined people, and they're fighters," said Sarah Stratham of the local Multicultural Refugee Coalition.

The fact remains that, like all refugees, they were forced to flee from their home country.

“They come here. They miss their country. They love their country, but they’re afraid to go back,” said Stratham. “It’s their home for all their life, and they don’t feel like they can ever go back until there’s peace.”

For Palaku, it’s about looking forward.

“I don’t miss anything,” he said of his home country. “There is nothing good about the Congo.”

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