

A conversation with Becca Heller, May 9, 2016

Participants

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

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

Summary

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

Funding

IRAP currently has a total budget for 2016 of about \$1,950,000 (including the Open Philanthropy Project's grant of \$350,000) and has requested funding from other major funders who are exploring work in this area. Ms. Heller expects IRAP to receive enough additional funding to bring its total to well over \$2 million.

Many funders have discussed funding refugee work as it has increased in salience over the past year, but Ms. Heller is not aware of many major foundation funders who have made substantial new commitments in the area.

Staff recruitment

IRAP plans to use Open Philanthropy funds to make three hires, and has already completed the process for two them:

- A full-time communications hire. IRAP staff interviewed 8 or 9 applicants and recently hired someone who speaks many languages and has done communications work for many women's rights organizations. This person will replace someone else who worked on doing both communications and database maintenance, and is leaving to go to law school. IRAP will make a separate hire to replace the database management role using other general operating funds.
- A national security policy associate. IRAP hired a veteran who they had considered for another role previously, who had since completed a masters degree in War Studies in the UK.

The remaining role, which IRAP expects to begin searching for soon, is for a lawyer focused on refugee law and policy issues such as access to legal counsel, private sponsorship, and family unification. This person will search for technical changes

that can be leveraged to help refugees come to the US. IRAP is still working on the job description for the position. Hiring for this position will enable IRAP to work on a report using data about refugee admissions gathered under the Freedom of Information Act. IRAP has been working on this for a long time, but has not had adequate capacity to process the data they've received into a finished report.

Advocacy

National Defense Authorization Act

IRAP is working to secure 4,000 Special Immigrant Visas for Iraqi and Afghanis who worked with U.S. forces in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The House version of the NDAA introduced a large eligibility limitation; in the Senate version, IRAP is trying to reduce the impact of that limitation.

United Nations General Assembly meeting

President Obama will host a summit during the September 2016 United Nations General Assembly meeting to address the refugee crisis. IRAP has been following this, and it seems likely that during the summit, the US will announce plans to follow through on the President's stated goal of admitting at least 100,000 refugees in FY 2017, and may even commit to a slightly higher number. There seems to be recognition that in order to admit this many refugees, the admission process will need to improve, and IRAP is working to propose appropriate reforms.

Syrian refugee admissions

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was asked to identify 10,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan to be interviewed for resettlement in the U.S. by the end of April, 2016. UNHCR met this goal, and now nearly 11,000 Syrian refugees have been interviewed. Circuit riders were pulled from around the world to accomplish this.

Processing NGO referrals

IRAP and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are trying to encourage UNHCR to partner more with NGO and civil society organizations on refugee referrals. Success has been mixed.

Potential partnerships

The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) is planning some new work on refugee resettlement reform. Ms. Heller hopes that after IRAP increases its staff capacity, it will be able to help convene MPI and other groups and individuals working on reforms in this area (e.g. around private sponsorship).

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