



Why Refugees Need More than Just Immediate Employment

Yvette M. Young, University of Utah

Many refugees who arrive in the United States end up stuck in low-wage jobs, because they are ill-prepared to navigate the job market – even after receiving training and support from refugee service providers. Services that help refugees find employment often focus on rapid employment, which emphasizes finding, accepting, and retaining the first available and attainable job. Services that can help new arrivals find higher-skilled, better-paying jobs — and provide ongoing support for occupational advancement — are not well developed. In practice, this means that many refugees can find it hard to make the transition to self-sufficiency.

Research documents these trends. Despite assistance from expert and experienced refugee service providers, very few refugees achieve a livable wage by the time they have been in the United States for five years. In my 2018 study of refugee employment in Utah, I analyzed the employment histories of refugees who had been in the U.S. for less than five years. Only eight percent, I discovered, had found jobs with a livable hourly wage, and only six percent had found livable-wage jobs that offered full-time hours.

Achieving economic self-sufficiency is a process for refugees; it does not happen all at once. However, due to lack of resources, most service providers focus only on finding rapid employment for their clients — an approach that typically opens few opportunities for socio-economic mobility. The skills and training that contribute to rapid employment differ from those that enable refugees to find jobs that pay a livable wage. To assist the long-term economic integration of refugees, a different approach is needed.

Why Refugee Services Emphasize Immediate Employment

While conducting my research, I met an Iraqi man who was waiting for an appointment with an employment counselor. He told me that in his home country he had managed a factory with hundreds of employees, but at that time he was just trying to find an “emergency” job — the kind of placement refugee agencies tend to emphasize.

There are several reasons why service providers emphasize rapid employment over placement in jobs with a livable wage and potential for advancement. One reason is that resource-poor service agencies rely on federal grants to support their employment assistance programs. These grants require monthly reports and reward programs that report high employment rates. Inadvertently, granting agencies pressure service providers to emphasize rapid employment over employment that provides a path to self-sufficiency. Federal grants typically fund services for which quick “success” can be quantified; and they favor services that reduce government expenditures on behalf of refugees. Any kind of employment matches such preferences — with the result that both the federal government and local service providers emphasize rapid job placements over helping refugees find lines of work that pay livable wages and allow for career advancements.

Different Skills are Needed for Entry-level and Livable-Wage Jobs

The emphasis service providers place on rapid employment short-changes training in skills and characteristics that are important for earning livable wages. For example, knowledge of U.S. employment-related cultural practices is important for rapid employment, but is unrelated to securing a livable wage. In my study, I read more than 4,000 case notes that employment counselors wrote documenting the job searches of their refugee clients. A recurring theme was miscommunication. One refugee did not understand why she had been fired for not going to work when she was sick. Her job counselor had to explain to her that she was not fired for being sick, but for failing to notify her employer that she would be missing work due to illness. Entry-level refugee employees are often unfamiliar with U.S. customs around workplace communication, especially unwritten rules about deference to managers and supervisors. Violation of these customs often results in tension or conflict in the workplace. As a result, job counselors endeavor to provide extensive training about workplace customs. Refugees seeking rapid job placements also benefit from English-speaking ability.

Surprisingly, English speaking ability is not associated with finding livable wage job opportunities. Furthermore, high levels of education, such as a college degree, and the use of wider co-ethnic social networks, are more valuable for obtaining jobs of that kind. In short, the kinds of help counselors looking for quick placements tend to offer refugees may not be what they need to find higher-paying jobs that open opportunities for the future.

A New Model for Employment Preparedness

If a key goal of refugee resettlement is self-sufficiency and eventual economic mobility, focusing on rapid employment may not be the best approach. Indeed, a 2003 study conducted by Miriam Potocky-Tripodi found that programs focused on “rapid employment” place refugees “in early, dead-end jobs with no upward mobility over time.” A better approach would be long-term training programs lasting from one to three years, programs that allow significant improvements in English-speaking and cultural knowledge while simultaneously providing access to educational assistance. That assistance should include programs that offer degree recertification, industry-specific training in fields that pay livable wages, and professional certifications.

A new program in Texas took this approach, extending pre-employment training to increase education in desirable workplace skills. Although the initial investment in was more costly, the average amount of time between arrivals and earning livable wages was reduced from 13 years to 1.5 years. Over time, the financial impact on government resources declined, because fewer refugees were stuck in low-paying jobs and had to fall back into reliance on government help.

In the current political climate, people who need government help are viewed unfavorably and support for refugee assistance is declining. My research suggests that refugee programs should shift from rapid job placement to bolstering the skills and social assets that help refugees procure a livable wage and self-sufficiency in their new home. Both the new arrivals and the country as a whole would benefit from this change.