

Using Partnerships to Support Refugee Self-Sufficiency

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The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) assists refugees as they integrate into American society and attain self-sufficiency. Through a variety of programs, ORR provides new arrivals with short-term cash and medical assistance, case management services, English language classes, and job readiness and employment services. One such program is the Voluntary Agencies Matching Grant (MG) Program. Through this program, ORR awards grants to resettlement agencies to help eligible families develop life skills and find employment. The MG Program aims to help families achieve economic self-sufficiency within six months of arrival. MG Program grant recipients use cash and in-kind donations to match funding provided by ORR (see box).

ORR is interested in learning how resettlement agencies and their local affiliates leverage partnerships to provide services for new arrivals. Of all programs within ORR, the MG Program provides the best documentation of partnerships at the community level. Therefore, as a part of the Administration for Children and Families Evidence Capacity Support project, Mathematica and Child Trends engaged with ORR to better understand the types of financial matching approaches and partnerships used in the MG Program. The Evidence Capacity Support project team reviewed MG Program reporting documents provided by ORR and interviewed staff from resettlement agencies and their local affiliates (see box on page 2 for more details).

In this brief, we describe common approaches that resettlement agencies and local affiliates used for securing matching funds and building partnerships. We also summarize challenges and lessons learned from MG recipients. MG recipients and other refugee-serving organizations can use these lessons to secure matching funds and build and maintain successful partnerships.

Common approaches to securing matching funds and partnerships

Securing matching funds

In 2022, nine national resettlement agencies implemented the MG Program through their networks of local affiliate organizations. The local affiliates are primarily responsible for securing the required matching funds, which they accomplish through three core approaches: volunteers, in-kind or material donations, and cash donations. In interviews, resettlement agencies described their role primarily as structuring the

Matching Grant Program

The Matching Grant (MG) Program is a public-private partnership that engages communities in supporting refugees through donations and in-kind support, such as material goods, volunteer hours, employment opportunities, and training. In 2022, nine resettlement agency grant recipients implemented the MG Program at 209 of their local affiliates throughout the nation. MG Program grant recipients agree to match funds provided by ORR via cash or in-kind contributions from the community. ORR contributes \$2 (up to \$2,000 in direct client assistance funding) for every \$1 raised by the grant recipient agency. Funds are calculated on a per-capita basis; however, spending of the funds is not, which gives agencies and affiliates flexibility in meeting clients' needs. Services and supports funded by the MG Program are provided at the local affiliate level, must support the goals and objectives of the MG Program, and must be auditable, tracked, and verified. The MG Program awards funds to resettlement agencies, and the agencies determine the match amount for the local affiliates in their network via sub-agreements.

matching requirements for each local affiliate and supporting these affiliates in securing, documenting, and reporting their matches. However, affiliates reported that resettlement agencies sometimes funneled larger-scale in-kind or cash donations to them, which counted toward the match requirement. This section contains more details about how local affiliates met the match requirements.

- **Volunteers are the most common way to meet the required match**, according to local affiliates. Volunteers assist with a wide variety of tasks across service areas—most commonly, employment services (for example, résumé writing, job searches, and mock interviews), English language training, social adjustment services (for example, financial literacy training), and core maintenance services (for example, transporting clients to and from job interviews or appointments). Some affiliates also offer mentorship or sponsorship programs through which volunteers are paired with a family enrolled in the MG Program and committed to supporting families for a certain amount of time (such as four to six months). The number of volunteers per local affiliate varies depending on the size of the affiliate and local or societal context. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a decrease in volunteers for many affiliates, but media coverage of refugee experiences and the U.S. response motivated new volunteers.
- **Local affiliates use a variety of in-kind and material donations to meet client needs.** Common in-kind donations include volunteer time and mileage, as well as the use of space for meetings, trainings (such as English classes), or other events. Material donations help clients achieve self-sufficiency by meeting concrete physical and material needs. These donations commonly include clothing (in particular, attire for job interviews), household goods and supplies (such as furniture and kitchenware), cars and bicycles, cell phones, and laptops (for example, for remote training and schooling). However, affiliates might shy away from accepting some material donations because of administrative burdens. For example, donating a car requires transferring the title of the car to the organization before it can be donated to the client.
- **Local affiliates use cash donations for the match less frequently than other approaches.** Some local affiliates host annual fundraisers to help fulfill matching requirements, and in some instances, resettlement agencies distribute cash donations among their affiliates. Many local affiliates also raise funds through grants and private donations they use for administrative purposes to support the MG Program (for example, employee salaries not covered by federal funds) and to provide direct assistance to clients (for example, rent, utilities, clothing, transportation).
- **Approaches to meeting the match requirement differ by local affiliate size and capacity.** For example, larger sites might be more likely than smaller sites to use cash to fulfill the matching requirement because they have the community visibility to attract cash donations. Resettlement agencies reported that although volunteer and in-kind matches are more time-intensive for staff to document, they are easier for affiliates to secure; on the other hand, a cash match is the easiest to document but more difficult to secure.

Data sources

Document review. The Evidence Capacity Support project team reviewed documents from a sample of 115 local affiliate sites. (The Office of Refugee Resettlement shared these documents with the team.) The team compiled descriptive information about approaches to meeting matching requirements, the types of partnerships grant recipients pursue, how grant recipients engage partners and in what service areas, and the level of community support for Matching Grant recipients.

Staff interviews. The team also spoke directly with staff from all nine resettlement agencies and staff from one local affiliate per resettlement agency, for a total of 18 interviews. These conversations provided valuable insights into the ways grant recipients secure and manage partnerships and matches, challenges to securing and managing those partnerships, and recommendations for building and sustaining partnerships.

Partnerships

Developing partnerships with local and national networks of employers, local public and nonprofit service providers, and other community stakeholders is essential to helping refugees achieve self-sufficiency and integrate into the community. Local affiliates reported that partnerships not only help them meet the match requirements (for example, through donated goods or funds) but also help them provide culturally responsive services and opportunities for clients, such as free English classes. As described in this section, affiliates partner with businesses, local colleges or vocational schools, and faith-based organizations (FBOs) to help fulfill their matching commitments and meet client needs.

- **Local affiliates partner with a variety of businesses to provide clients with employment opportunities and training.** Common industries with which affiliates partner include hospitality, manufacturing, food production, health care, construction, and information technology industries. In some instances, partnerships with employers go beyond job opportunities. For example, one local affiliate described a long-term partnership with a large poultry production company that also provided on-site English language classes and transportation options for employees.
- **Local colleges and vocational schools are also important partners in supporting self-sufficiency.** According to local affiliates, these partnerships support client self-sufficiency via English language classes and training for professional certifications, such as certified nursing aide courses, forklift operation training, information technology support, and commercial driver's licensure. Secondary education institutions, which commonly have service-learning programs requiring students to volunteer their time, can also be a source for recruiting volunteers or interns.
- **Partnerships with FBOs are a valuable source of volunteers and donations.** One affiliate reported that it encourages local FBOs to become certified to provide English classes or driver's licensure courses, as clients might be more comfortable in faith-based settings. FBOs also foster connections to local employers through their congregations or members, thus opening additional employment opportunities to support self-sufficiency among refugee clients. Furthermore, many local affiliates are FBOs themselves, which helps promote partnerships among similar organizations.

Much of the development and maintenance of partnerships occurs at the local affiliate level, with support from resettlement agencies. In some cases, resettlement agencies reported having national partnerships with large businesses (such as international hotel chains and food production companies) or religious organizations; the resettlement agencies then distribute donations or opportunities from national partners to the affiliates. This section summarizes common strategies used to build and sustain partnerships.

- **According to local affiliates, both affiliates and potential partner organizations make initial outreach attempts.** Sometimes the affiliates make the first attempt at outreach, but other times, the partner organizations (usually employers) make the first move. Some affiliates have development or advancement teams that lead outreach and engagement. Affiliates reported that they commonly connect with organizations through calls, emails, meetings, and social media.
- **Regular communication and personal relationships are imperative to maintaining long-term partnerships.** Local affiliates emphasized the importance of making personal connections with organizations and people in the community to build sustainable partnerships. Maintaining regular contact with and showing appreciation for partners helps keep them engaged over time. Examples of such engagement include sending holiday cards, holding employer appreciation events, and regularly calling employers who have hired refugees to check in on the employers' satisfaction with new hires (which is also an MG Program requirement).
- **Program visibility is critical for attracting new partners.** Local affiliate staff participate in regional media interviews and attend events at schools and universities to call attention to the needs of refugees. In addition, organizations and community members often reach out directly to affiliates after hearing media coverage of refugee experiences because they want to get involved and offer support or partnership. For example, the influx of Afghan and Ukrainian humanitarian parolees in 2022 was

featured prominently in the news, and local affiliates reported an uptick in calls from organizations in the community offering support and partnership.

- **Community engagement is key to sustaining partnerships.** Many local affiliates reported being a part of local task forces, advisory boards, or consortia with employers, service providers, and other refugee-serving organizations in their area. These groups typically meet quarterly to discuss employment opportunities and other supports to ensure clients’ needs are being met. One affiliate created an advisory board with several potential employment partners, which helped improve its job training curriculum and led to on-the-job training opportunities for clients.

Identifying challenges and solutions

Developing and maintaining partnerships does not come without challenges; fortunately, resettlement agencies and local affiliates have developed strategies to address many of them in innovative ways.

Challenge	Variability in refugee arrivals and availability of volunteers and in-kind donations can affect how grant recipients manage partnerships. Geopolitical events and government policy changes can quickly influence the number of arriving refugees. Similarly, local affiliates and resettlement agencies reported that interest from outside partners or individuals is often dictated by the news cycle (for example, the prominence of the Afghan evacuation and the conflict in Ukraine) and can wane as quickly as it increases. This inconsistency can make it challenging to effectively manage partnerships, volunteers, and donations. Local affiliates might lack the staff to deliver services to a growing number of refugees or handle influxes of donated goods. In these cases, they might also be less able to regularly connect with partner organizations, which could affect those relationships in the long term.
Solution	Cultivate opportunities and partnerships that are responsive to changing circumstances. One local affiliate reported partnering with a local nonprofit organization that trains community members to be part of a “welcome team” that includes more than 700 volunteers. This offers the affiliate access to a large number of volunteers when it experiences an influx of clients.
Challenge	Some resettlement agencies and local affiliates lamented the inability to dedicate staff solely to developing and maintaining partnerships because of a lack of funding for those positions. Although not the case for all organizations, this means staff must manage partnerships in addition to their primary responsibilities. With these constraints, staff struggle to devote the time necessary to build and manage partnerships effectively.
Solution	Encourage and train all staff—from caseworkers to front desk staff—to build relationships with potential partners. This helps spread the load and avoids overburdening any single staff member. For example, staff could rotate attending community meetings or events, with the intent of building connections with other like-minded organizations in the community.
Solution	Work with resettlement agencies to expand or replicate partnerships developed by other local affiliates. One resettlement agency reported building on a relationship developed by one of its affiliates with an employer that has a national presence, further expanding that partnership to include other affiliates in the agency’s network.
Challenge	Managing and storing material donations that are not aligned with refugee needs can impose a substantial burden on staff. According to resettlement agencies, well-intentioned community members donate items refugees do not commonly need. For example, people might donate king size sheet sets when clients typically have twin and full beds. Staff must store or dispose of these items, which can take time away from other duties.
Solution	Educate the community about refugee and program needs. Sharing information about refugee experiences and needs with volunteers and the community at large can mitigate this challenge. For example, when soliciting or responding to inquiries about donations, local affiliates have been most successful when they are explicit about the types of items the program needs and the types of items they cannot accept. Other affiliates have created opportunities for volunteers, employers, and partners to meet clients, learn more about refugees as individuals, and build connections. For example, one affiliate invited potential employer partners to its in-house English language classes to meet clients, which helped employers get to know clients on a more personal level.

Challenge	Volunteers sometimes struggle to set boundaries with clients. Local affiliates reported that volunteers, although well intentioned, sometimes struggle to set boundaries with clients, which could result in dependent relationships between volunteers and clients or breaches of confidentiality (such as sharing photos on social media).
Solution	Robust training programs for volunteers can address this challenge by focusing on how to best support clients in meeting their own needs while setting appropriate boundaries.

Conclusion

The MG Program is an important part of ORR's mission to foster self-sufficiency among refugees by providing funding to resettlement agencies and local affiliates that they can use to provide services and meet client needs. Affiliates regularly partner with a wide array of employers and community organizations and use a combination of approaches—including volunteers and in-kind or cash donations—to leverage federal funding and meet the matching requirements of the MG Program. Developing and maintaining local partnerships can be challenging, but resettlement agencies and their affiliate networks use innovative strategies to overcome these challenges.

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