

Date of Hearing: June 6, 2023

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Corey A. Jackson, Chair

SB 465 (Wahab) – As Amended March 20, 2023

SENATE VOTE: 39-0

SUBJECT: Refugees

SUMMARY: Requires the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to post a list of resources available to refugees on its website. Specifically, **this bill:**

1) Requires CDSS to post the following resource information for refugees on its website:

- a) Public transportation, including but not limited to:
 - i) Schedule information, and,
 - ii) Free or discounted rate information for jurisdictions across the state;
- b) Financial literacy information;
- c) Resources for establishing credit;
- d) Job orientation and training;
- e) Mental health services from the state and counties;
- f) Affordable state and counties housing and rental assistance programs available; and,
- g) Information on how to get a special immigrant visa.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Requires CDSS to allocate federal funds for refugee social services programs to eligible counties, and, if CDSS exercises their discretion, to a qualified nonprofit organization, based on the number of refugees residing or receiving aid in the country. (Welfare and Institution Code Section [WIC] 13276)
- 2) Defines “refugee social services” as English language and employment training, as funded through federal appropriations. (WIC 13275(c))
- 3) Requires that CDSS notify each eligible county’s board of supervisors of the funds available for refugee social services programs. (WIC 13277(a))
- 4) Requires refugee social services programs be available to recipients of refugee cash assistance and refugees receiving county general assistance in eligible counties. (WIC 13279)

FISCAL EFFECT: According to the Senate Appropriations Committee, pursuant to Senate Rule 28.8, this bill would result in negligible state costs.

COMMENTS:

Background: The Immigration and Nationality Act defines refugees as individuals who are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin or nationality because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. The current nationwide refugee ceiling is 125,000 which is a substantial increase from the record low ceiling of only 18,000 in 2020. The Migration Policy Institute reports that as of March 2023, there have been 18,429 refugees admitted this year. California continues to be one of the top resettlement destinations for refugees. According to the California Immigrant Data Portal, 10% of refugees resettled in California. Sacramento, San Diego, and Los Angeles counties were the top destinations in the country for refugees in California.

The Refugee Act of 1980 (Act) was passed by Congress in order to standardize resettlement services for all refugees admitted to the United States (U.S.) The Act also provides the legal basis for the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to provide federal funding and services to refugees at state and local levels. The state is required to submit a State Plan every federal fiscal year describing how money is spent and what programs exist. The last State Plan was published in 2019 and included a plan for cash and medical assistance, language training, cash assistance, medical screening, social services, and unaccompanied minors. Refugee assistance programs and services are housed within CDSS and the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) and then services are delivered on the local level by counties, community based organization, and local health departments.

CDSS' Refugee Programs Bureau (Bureau) is responsible for coordinating benefits and services to refugees and has statewide administrative responsibility for the Cash Assistance for Immigrants (CAPI), Refugee Cash Assistance and Employment Services, Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program, Trafficking and Crime Victims Assistance Program, and the Repatriation Program.

In areas where a larger population of refugees reside, CDSS designates these counties as "refugee-impacted". Counties that have received 400 or more refugee arrivals during the most recent five-year period are considered "refugee-impacted." Refugee-impacted counties have a county refugee coordinator (CRC) that develops strategies and operating procedures, and oversees funding for their county's refugee services and programs. The designated counties are currently listed on CDSS' website as: Alameda, Los Angeles, Orange, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, Santa Clara, and Stanislaus. According to a CRC fact sheet published by CDSS:

"The CRC is responsible for planning, coordinating and overseeing the delivery of public social services in the county to assist refugees in becoming economically self-sufficient. The CRC has knowledge and experience in both refugee policies and issues, and public assistance programs and services. The CRC works with local governmental and non-governmental organizations to ensure necessary services are available to refugees. The CRC manages Office of Refugee Resettlement, Refugee Social Services, Targeted Assistance (TA), and TA discretionary grant funds allocated to counties by the Refugee Programs Bureau.

The CRCs regularly participate in local refugee forums and community meetings to address concerns in an ongoing effort to improve the provision of services for the refugee population."

The Bureau currently has a landing page on CDSS' website that includes mission, population served, duties, population-specific information, grant information, as well as an area for "other resources" that provides a space for information that does not squarely fit into the former mentioned subject areas. The landing page also includes a long list of relevant links for refugees such as food assistance, Welcome Corps, maps, homelessness fact sheets, the naturalization process and a resource guide.

CDPH oversees the Office of Refugee Health (ORH). ORH coordinates the Refugee Health Assessment Program and the Refugee Medical Assistance Program. CDPH's website provides information for health clinics, mental health, employment, legal, housing, and county specific resources.

Author's Statement: According to the Author, "At any given time, California is home to hundreds of refugees seeking assistance and resources following life-changing, and often traumatic experiences. As programs for refugees, such as the Afghan Support & Investment Program (ASIP), begin to expire, it is incumbent upon California to provide easy access to information on ongoing mental health services, public transportation programs, financial literacy training, affordable housing opportunities, and rental assistance programs, among other services, that are currently provided by the state and counties. [This bill] will centralize services for refugees so they can focus on the services they are in desperate need of."

Equity Implications: Refugees are fleeing from unsafe and traumatic environments, and as a result, need more assistance and services to get back on their feet. Over the last 10 years, of all the refugees fleeing political or civil unrest in their counties of origin to come to the U.S., 10% settle in California. In 2021, 986 refugees settled in California. In 2018, CDPH reported that, "even with a historically low number of arrivals, the data continues to show significant disparities in regards to infectious disease incidence, chronic disease indicators and health risk factors."

In 2019, ORR's Annual Survey of Refugees reported: 77% of refugees had full-time employment with \$13.42 as the average hourly wage, 54.1% of refugees possessed continuous medical coverage throughout previous 12 months, and 20.2% of refugees were homeowners.

Providing clear, succinct, and accessible information to California's refugee population is important to allow stability and ensure basic human needs are met.

Policy Considerations: This bill requires a number of different topics be posted on CDSS' website that range from financial literacy, public transportation, mental health services, housing, and visa information. Currently, information is posted on various different websites such as CDSS, CDPH, and counties which can be confusing and unclear. Services vary from county to county and those seeking services might benefit further from being directed to each county. As such, in order to accomplish the goal of creating a central location for refugees to better navigate available services, the author may wish to amend their bill to direct CDSS to create a single landing page directing refugees to their respective local welfare departments.

Proposed Committee Amendments: The Committee proposes amendments to address policy considerations stated above to do the following:

- Require CDSS to create a single page on their website for refugees with links to county welfare websites.

- Require counties to post information and resources for refugees.

PRIOR AND RELATED BILLS:

AB 1536 (Carrillo) of 2023, would expand eligibility for CAPI to all individuals regardless of immigration status; deletes obsolete language; deletes requirements to apply for Supplemental Security Income/State Supplementary Program for the Aged, Blind, and Disabled (SSI/SSP) in order to qualify for CAPI. *AB 1536 is awaiting referral in Senate Rules Committee.*

AB 2973 (Santiago) of 2019, would have created an agency within state government called the “Immigrant and Refugee Affairs Agency” (IRAA), would have created the “Immigrant and Refugee Integration Fund” within the State Treasury, and would have transferred to the IRAA any property of any office, agency or department that relates to functions transferred to the IRAA from other departments. *AB 2973 was held on the Assembly Appropriations Committee suspense file.*

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**Support**

None on file

Opposition

None on file

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