



Assessing Barriers & Support for Refugees with Disabilities in U.S. Resettlement Programs

Isabel Hodge

Executive Director

US International Council on Disabilities

About the US International Council on Disabilities (USICD)

- **International**
- **501c3 nonprofit (over 33 yrs!)**
- **Disabled-led membership-based organization**
- **Strategic pillars:** Advocacy, Training & Education, Representation, Convening.
- **Our Board:** Former political appointees, intl human rights attorney, podcaster, LGBTQ + Disability members, CIL leaders.
- **Youth Advisory Committee** (international)
- **US National Assembly** – Disabled Peoples International (DPI) & Rehabilitation International
- **Secretary of DPI, Vice President of DPI N. America & Caribbean**
- **UN Consultative Status**
- **Led the advocacy campaign for the US Senate ratification of the CRPD**

Two Asylees



Azwan



Natty

CNN Headline: Amid Slaughter of a people, a boy finds hope in America

Amid slaughter of a people, a boy finds hope in America

Moni Basu, CNN
8 min read · Updated 5:31 PM EDT, Wed September 3, 2014



(CNN) — Azwan Elias arrived in America this summer filled with excitement and eagerness to learn. Everyone who knows him says he is wise beyond his 17 years, that he is destined to lead others in his restive homeland of Iraq.

He set foot on U.S. soil for the first time in June, part of a group of young Iraqis chosen for a

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Omara

- Person with a disability
- Arrived in the US in 2024
- Three school-aged boys
- Former Executive Director of a disability non-profit
- Former special advisor on disability to President Ashraf Ghani
- Refugee study Co-author



Identifying the Issues

- **US Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugee, and Migration, Reception, and Placement Program (R&P)**
 - Provides initial assistance (90 days)
 - Additional assistance available - HHS Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and the Refugee Resettlement Agencies (RRAs)
 - Little information on any of the websites regarding assistance for refugees with disabilities.
- **EOCIL and USICD met with Oregon RRA and the P&A.**
 - Were not aware that refugees with disabilities may receive SSI if they have a qualifying condition and meet the income requirements.

Background and Purpose

- **Why this study:** Identify gaps in RRA capacity to serve refugees with disabilities; inform policy and practice reforms.
- **Geographic reach:** Respondents resettled across MD, IA, CO, NC, TX, NV, MA, OK.



Refugee Resettlement Agencies (RRAs)

- Bethany Christian Services (BCS)
- Church World Service (CWS)
- Episcopal Migration Ministries (EMM)
- Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC)
- Global Refuge (formerly Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Service)
- HIAS
- International Rescue Committee
- US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI)
- US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)

US Govt Support

- RRA Case Management
- RRA Cash Assistance
- Accessible Housing
- Vocational Job Training
- Job Search Assistance
- English Language Training
- Childcare
- Transportation Services
- Medicaid
- Refugee Medical Assistance
- Support for Trauma-Affected Refugee Services (STAR)
- SSI
- TANF
- SNAP
- Technical assistance for small business start-up/microenterprise development
- Youth mentoring
- Refugee Family Child Care Microenterprise Development
- Refugee Agricultural Partnership Program

Study Methodology

- **Design:** Two-phase pilot (Jan–Apr 2025):
- **Phase 1:** 17 structured interviews (translated instruments: English, French, Dari, Pashto); WGSS used.
- **Phase 2:** National survey to 160 disability organizations—low response (2 orgs), limited for analysis.
- **Limitations:** Political climate/PII concerns; survey fatigue; literacy and compensation barriers.

Demographics & Disability Profile

- **Key stats:**

- 71% met WGSS disability threshold.
- **Functional domains:** Mobility 47%; Self-care 53%; Communication 47%; Cognition 35%.
- **Gender:** 82% male respondents
- **Arrival years:** 2017–2025.

Service Access: Benefits & Health

- **Coverage:** Medicaid received by 83%; Refugee Medical Assistance only 24%.
- **Cash supports:** Refugee Cash Assistance common; SSI uptake very low (12%).
- **Trauma support:** STAR services used by 29%.
- **Gaps:** Clear lack of multilingual, disability-specific guidance for SSI and long-term supports.

Employment, Education, and Economic Inclusion

- **Employment:** 53% unemployed; many overqualified; 41% earn \$15–\$20/hr; only 12% full-time (40 hrs).
- **Vocational supports:** Only 24% male respondents received vocational training assistance.
- **Certifications:** Limited assistance to obtain required professional certifications

Housing, Transportation & Community Participation

- **Housing:** 76% reported accessible homes but 17% still needed accessible housing; reports of unsafe or inadequate units.
- **Transport:** 47% rely on public transit; localized access problems
- **Community:** Low access to adaptive recreation, mentoring, and peer supports; strong interest in participation.

RRA Capacity, Referrals, and Civil Rights Concerns

- **RRA staffing:** 94% felt agencies lacked training/capacity for disability needs.
- **Referrals:** Systematic referrals to CILs are rare.
- **Civil rights:** Gaps in due process, ADA and Section 504 compliance, and legal recourse for affected refugees

Strategic Recommendations — Federal Level

- **PRM (State Dept):** Integrate disability inclusion into R&P funding; make CLs eligible grantees; fund disability-led pilots.
- **ORR (HHS):** Issue multilingual SSI guidance for noncitizens; incentivize state pilots for accessible housing and transportation; integrate disability metrics into performance reviews.
- **Cross-agency:** Create Joint Interagency Disability Inclusion Task Force and Independent Review Board.

Strategic Recommendations — RRA & Local Practice

- **Intake & screening:** Mandatory disability screening using WGSS; automatic referral to CILs.
- **Training:** Standardized disability sensitivity and accommodations training for case managers.
- **Employment & Education:** Fund inclusive vocational pathways, credential recognition, and ESL integration.
- **Children:** Ensure IEP access and school-based supports.

Advocacy & Legal Pathways

- **Oversight:** Regular public reporting, FOIA transparency, and congressional briefings.
- **Legal:** Partner with legal aid to monitor ADA/Section 504 compliance; develop strategic litigation triggers.
- **Community voice:** Ensure disability and refugee representatives are co-equal members of oversight bodies.



CILs: Five Critical Roles

1. Strategic Partnership & Outreach

2. Direct IL Supports

- Benefits Counseling & SSI application assistance
- Peer support groups led by refugees with disabilities
- IL skills workshops
- Housing accessibility assessments
- Employment readiness and job matching

CILs: Five Critical Roles Cont.

3. Capacity Building & Training

4. Advocacy & Systems Change

5. Data, Monitoring & Feedback Loops

Two Ways to Partner with USICD

- Co-developing accessible training materials
- Jointly pursuing innovation grants



Contact Information

Isabel Hodge

ihodge@usicd.org

<http://usicd.org>