

Article written March 1982 as Lefpeh Lelevaler
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Ronald Reagan has said that welfare needs should be taken care of by local communities, not the federal government. The practicality of his view will face a crucial test here in the Seattle area after April 1. That is when 5384 of Seattle's Indochina refugees will be abruptly cut off from the federally financed housing and medical support which they have been receiving to date under the Refugee Act of 1980. There are no state funds to pick up the tab, so if the private sector here cannot somehow provide housing or jobs for most of these people, the resulting despair could lead to some suicides in the streets, according to professional counselors who work with the refugees.

The timing of this sudden shift in federal policy could scarcely have been worse. The cut-off is being imposed with only minimal prior notice, and after other federal programs specifically designed to help refugees find jobs and become self-supporting have, illogically, already been slashed. And all this comes at a time when unemployment in the State of Washington is running officially at 12.4% (unofficially as high as 20%), with 244,000 people reportedly out of work.

In fairness, it should not be forgotten that this particular welfare problem which Seattle now faces was not caused, in the first instance, by the federal government, but rather by a handful of men in far-off Hanoi whose policies since 1975 - ranging from outright extermination of the hill peoples of Laos to political oppression of the conquered population of former South Vietnam and military conquest of Cambodia - have driven no less than 1,396,000 Indochinese into exile.

Some 554,000 of this number have come to the United States under a program that defines refugees so broadly as to include not only the politically oppressed but also many other people who did not, strictly speaking, have to leave home but were really economic migrants in search of a better life. About 20,000 of ~~these Asian~~^{both types} ~~etc~~
^{of both types} refugees now live in the environs of Seattle. And whereas the first wave after 1975 were people who had worked with Americans in Southeast Asia and had marketable skills and facility in English, the later arrivals were often simple migrants who lacked all of these advantages.

Responding to the challenge, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980 under which the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Department of Health and Human Services undertook to provide up to 36 months of cash (mainly for housing and utilities) and medical assistance at levels keyed to the existing state programs for aid to families with dependent children. The Act also provided for social services, ^{including English language training} intended to help the refugee find a job and become self-sustaining as soon as possible. Critics of the program say it provided for too long a period of welfare, on the one hand, and too weak an emphasis on social services, on the other, thus encouraging dependency by cash benefits while doing too little to hasten the day when refugees could enter the job market and support themselves.

For their part, the refugees do not like to live on government welfare, for which there was no tradition in their own countries, and could solve all their problems if they could just get jobs. They have eagerly seized on the entry-level tasks which native-born Americans used to scorn. But with the recession, it has become increasingly difficult for the refugees here to find any job, however menial.

It is precisely at this unpromising moment that the Office of Refugee Resettlement, responding to the Reagan Administration budget cuts, has abruptly announced its decision to reduce cash and medical assistance for the last 18 months of the traditional period of entitlement to the level of each state's own "general assistance" welfare program. The Catch-22 is that states like Washington, Oregon and Florida have no such program of the type to which the federal action is linked and therefore will, after April 1, get nothing. This has the effect of a massive and sudden federal reneging. More important, it means that more than 5000 refugees in the Seattle area who would like to work but can't find jobs, will suddenly find themselves with no means to pay the rent. And each month, about 400 more will be added to the rolls of the desperate as their first 18 months of federal entitlement expires.

Concerned officials and private citizens here are hoping that the private sector will somehow be able to pick up the pieces in the wake of this sudden switch of federal policy, either by finding jobs or providing shelter, but no one here can yet explain how it will be done. So some refugees are heading out of the state to places like California where the federal funds will still remain in effect, or where there are rumors of jobs. Many others feel they have no place to turn, in a land where they often cannot speak the language, cannot find work, and soon will have no place to live.

Whatever this Seattle crisis has to say, pro or con, about the wisdom of the Reagan welfare philosophy, and however much it must condemn the way in which the new approach has been so abruptly and, many say, irresponsibly imposed on this community, it must also call in question the need for a revamping of U.S. refugee policy as a whole.

It would seem to say that, to reduce overall numbers and promote better planning, clearer lines must be drawn between legitimate political refugees and those who are really economic immigrants who should be admitted only under normal immigration quotas. Federal programs for such refugees as are accepted should provide for a shorter period of welfare entitlement but, at the same time, a more intensive and practical resettlement program emphasizing not only the present English language training but also, as early as possible, vocational and on-the-job training. Consideration should also be given to the obvious fact that many young, able-bodied refugees could, as volunteers, make a valuable contribution to our military services while, at the same time, acquiring skills, language, Americanization and, in the process, an income for themselves and their families.

Getting the federal government out of the business of refugee relief is an understandable goal, but the way it is being done in this Seattle case - which is unfair both to this well-meaning community and to the refugees - is not the way to do it.

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