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CHURCH WORLD SERVICE

**ADDRESSING REFUGEE
UNDEREMPLOYMENT IN VIRGINIA**
A REPORT PREPARED FOR CHURCH WORLD SERVICE

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DISCLAIMER

The author conducted this study as part of the program of professional education at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, University of Virginia. This paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of the course requirements for the Master of Public Policy degree. The judgements and conclusions are solely those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the Batten School, University of Virginia, or by any other agency.

HONOR PLEDGE

On my honor as a University of Virginia student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Christian Tjoa', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Christian Tjoa

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the U.S. refugee program, there is dedicated focus to finding employment for recently resettled refugees. However, little research has been done on the effects of refugee underemployment, where refugees work in jobs that are below their skill set. This report aims to quantify the effects of refugee underemployment on both an individual and societal level and provide recommendations to mitigate refugee underemployment in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Church World Service (CWS) is a humanitarian aid organization that operates as one of the refugee resettlement agencies in the Commonwealth, and thus has a vested interest in the improvement of refugee employment outcomes.

The best evidence in the literature identifies major disparities due to refugee underemployment. The economy is not functioning at its fullest potential if people with desirable skills are stuck doing menial work. Everyone misses out on added tax revenue and a higher quality of services provided. This is before even mentioning the toll on refugees themselves. In addition to depressed wages, refugees suffer from lower self-esteem and struggles with mental health as a result of underemployment, already on top of the inherent stress of acclimating to a completely new culture. While the literature about refugee-specific underemployment is still developing, it is clear there are two general paths that could be followed: an upstreamist approach or a targeted approach. The former calls for universal policies for refugees, like language training or additional case management, that give exceptional benefits to highly skilled professions. Proponents of a targeted approach want to specifically target policies that are barriers to high skilled professions, like licensing and accreditation.

After considering the merits of these competing approaches, I suggest three possible policy alternatives to address refugee underemployment:

1. Targeted reform of professional licensing
2. Expansion of English as a Second Language (ESL) programming
3. Establishment of an incentive-based subsidy program

These policy alternatives are evaluated on the following criteria: effectiveness, political feasibility, cost, speed of implementation, and sensitivity. The most weight is given to effectiveness and feasibility given CWS's position as an advocacy and service-providing NGO rather than a policy-making body.

The analysis shows that CWS should advocate for **targeted reform of professional licensing** to most effectively handle refugee underemployment. This policy alternative is best suited to the subgroup of interest, high skilled refugees, while proving low cost and politically palatable. ESL expansion scored just behind, but it did not do enough to tackle structural barriers that high skilled refugees in particular face. It still remains a viable policy to benefit refugees at large. The novel subsidy program proved too high cost with not enough certainty to justify the price tag.

For implementation, CWS should immediately begin organizing their advocacy network in preparation for the next Virginia legislative session. Additionally, CWS should bolster their internal data collection about refugees' careers prior to resettlement and their eventual aspirations in America.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Refugees arriving in America face a slew of challenges when integrating in American society. Prominent among these challenges is access to jobs that match their skillset. **Too few refugees in Virginia are able to work in their original specialized fields, harming their morale and their ability to contribute to their new communities.** This problem affects both individuals and society at large. Virginia is missing out on a valuable source of economic potential and is doing a disservice to a vulnerable portion of its population. CWS has a unique opportunity to both advocate for its clients and present an economic case as well as humanitarian.

BACKGROUND

REFUGEE POLICY AND HISTORY IN THE UNITED STATES

The United States refugee program took shape much the same as any other country: after the 1951 Refugee Convention and its associated 1967 Protocol. This meeting defined the word “refugee” as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR, 2011). Refugees are not entirely synonymous with asylum seekers, though the two are often used interchangeable in popular discourse. Asylum seekers arrive at a border and are granted asylum if they meet the refugee definition, while refugees have already had their claims evaluated and granted. The process usually involves a person fleeing their home country into a neighboring country and then staying in a refugee camp while the resettlement process kicks into gear. According to World Bank estimates, the median length of time that a refugee stays in a camp is 5 years (Devictor, 2019), with some staying much longer, up to decades. Refugees do not choose the country they resettle in; it is essentially a lottery unless they have a sponsor in a particular country (usually a nuclear family member) or if they worked with a military unit as a translator. When refugees are resettled in America, they come under the care of groups like CWS, Catholic Charities, and other resettlement organizations. These agencies employ case managers who help clients with “essential services”, which are required tasks like apartment set-up, cultural orientation, signing up for Medicaid and Social Security, and other fundamental items.

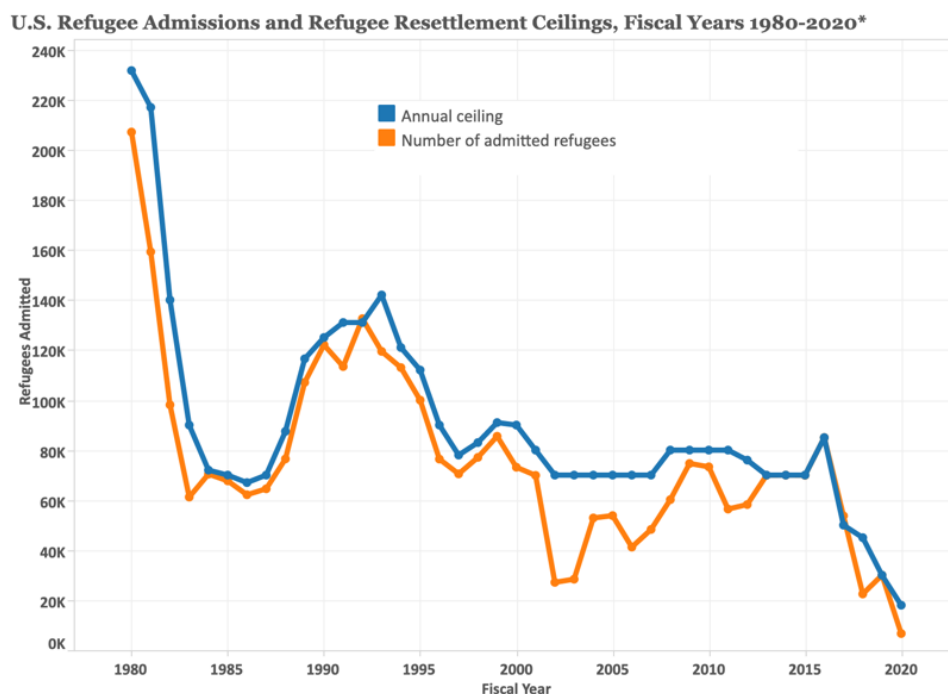
The countries of origin for American refugee admissions are a diverse group, with the D.R. Congo, Burma/Myanmar, and Ukraine remaining the top countries of origin steadily over the past four years (National Immigration Forum). The numbers have changed rapidly over this time period following President Donald Trump’s 2016 travel ban from selected countries, which included Somalia, Syria, and Iran which were all once top countries of origin (Zezima, 2019). Another major resettlement country is Afghanistan, largely through Special Immigrant Visas (SIV), which are given to the aforementioned military translators.

To add to the complexity, different states have different rates of settling refugees based on country of origin. This is because while refugee selection is a long and arduous process, family relationships or “sponsors” play a large part in where some refugees are placed, leading to certain nationalities settling

in large numbers in the same state (think the large Somali population in Minnesota). This includes a large portion of SIV clients, who receive asylum in America after aiding the military with translating. This context is essential to understanding why refugee policy cannot be “one size fits all”. There are simply too many variables; the languages spoken vary from Farsi to Zulu, the religions from persecuted Christians in Iran to Shia Muslims from Syria. This is before even considering occupational status. Policies aimed at helping refugees therefore must vary from state to state to fit the needs of their specific demographics.

While state-level refugee policy is essential to consider, it is only natural for state-level refugee workforce policy to exist in tandem with broader U.S. refugee policy. This means the posture that the federal administration takes on refugee admission will affect all downstream policies as well. The number of refugees admitted to the United States fell massively during the Trump administration, with the maximum number of refugees accepted (the “ceiling” of admissions) being reduced from 85,000 in 2015 to 18,000 in 2020. These numbers actually obscure the total decline of refugee admission during the Trump administration, as the actual number of admitted refugees does not hit even a third of this lowered ceiling. Figure 1 below is a visualization by the Migration Policy Institute showing the extent of the fall. Fewer refugees admitted means fewer resources to resettlement agencies and other refugee organizations. This decline in new clients has forced advocacy groups onto the defensive by diverting resources into getting the total immigration numbers back up and makes prioritizing single issues at a time the only viable way to pursue policy change for refugee populations (O’Connor, 2019). However, the landscape has rapidly changed in just the past few months. CWS and

FIGURE 1: MPI VISUALIZATION OF REFUGEE ADMISSIONS (1980-2020)



Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub
<http://migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub>

similar advocacy groups must now adjust their advocacy strategy after the results of the November presidential election. President Joe Biden has called for a return to Obama-era refugee ceilings (Biden, 2020), and his refugee policy overall is likely to be diametrically opposed to the past four years. President Biden also selected California Attorney General Xavier Becerra to head Health and Human Services (HHS), which is the most important cabinet position for refugee resettlement as that Department houses the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Secretary Becerra has yet to issue any public statements about changes to the refugee program, but this will remain a situation to monitor moving forward.

REFUGEE LABOR IN VIRGINIA

The impact of refugee labor in Virginia is immense. For example, the aforementioned decline in refugee admissions has affected major resettlement cities like Harrisonburg, which is now seeing a shortage of poultry workers (Knadler, 2018). Refugees have also been described as the “driving forces” of the Shenandoah Valley economy, working in frontline industries and “[buying] into the promise of Virginia” (Plummer, 2020). Simply put, refugees provide much of the manual labor that helps keep the Commonwealth going, especially during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. This shortage exemplifies the type of work refugee workers are expected to do in the status quo. While refugees are heavily relied on to do manual labor such as poultry packing, they are often boxed out of jobs that they have training in, usually for reasons related to language barriers (Nielson & Chancey, 2020) or lack of American-specific industry knowledge (Jamil et al, 2012). Refugees are indeed an outlier case in this respect; a report from Upwardly Global found that refugees have lower employment rates than other migrants, even when controlling for other factors like previous experience in the field and educational attainment (Satar, 2017). The problem is therefore two-pronged: refugees have problems finding any gainful employment in the first place, and even when they do, it is often a skills mismatch and not in their preferred field. Clearly, this is an area that is disproportionately affecting refugee populations, making it a natural fit for a group like CWS to step in and manage.

With fewer refugees entering the country, refugee issues as a whole are difficult to keep in the news, much less addressed through formal policy. Advocacy groups are constantly pushing for attention, but outside of a coverage spike related to President Trump’s travel ban at the beginning of his presidency, refugees have largely faded from the news over the past four years (Parlapiano, 2018). In the instances that immigration policy is in the news, it has been used as a wedge issue by Republican messaging campaigns, with “caravans” and “invasions” of asylum seekers at the U.S./Mexico border being trumpeted before the 2018 midterms and shortly after President Biden’s inauguration (Lemire & Lucey, 2018; Bush, 2021). That being said, state level advocacy has still proven successful despite this fluctuating level of national attention. Given CWS’s aforementioned advocacy of the Virginia General Assembly was so fruitful, there is reason for optimism. Virginia has taken steps to open an Office of New Americans (ONA) (Aguilar, 2020) among other policy initiatives, so it seems reasonable that CWS could continue their success on workforce policy issues. Working with ONA and partners in the Virginia state legislature, CWS has the connections to leverage new workforce development programs. This is especially salient as labor concerns have grown more prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic, with overall unemployment skyrocketing above 10% (Stebbins, 2020). Given the

statistics that show that refugees work in the most vulnerable frontline positions (Plummer, 2020), the refugee unemployment rate is likely much higher than this 10% number. This could represent a window of opportunity for a discussion about how labor laws affect refugees more broadly.

For a tangible example of how this impact harms both the individual and the community, refugee doctors have only finally been able to acquire temporary licenses to help with staffing shortages during the coronavirus pandemic (Schafer, 2020). It is clear that these people's valuable skills were quite in demand when crisis occurred, yet there was no semblance of support to get these people working in medicine beforehand. These people were working jobs as cashiers, airport workers, or janitors. To be clear, this is not a value statement about these professions, but rather a simple statement that someone who is trained as a medical professional would be better served helping their community in that capacity. Without major reforms to get these skilled workers into the proper fields, the American and Virginian communities suffer, and people are stuck working jobs just to scrape by rather than thrive.

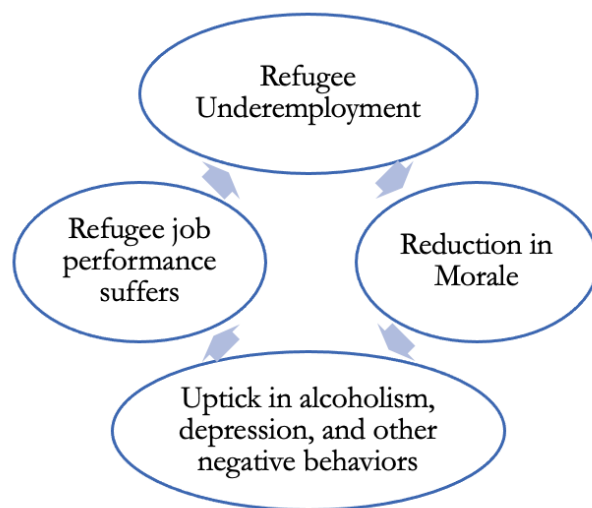
CONSEQUENCES

ARTIFICIALLY LIMITED ECONOMIC PRODUCTION

Maximizing economic output means placing workers where they are most productive, yet stringent licensing requirements make it cumbersome for refugees to enter fields that match their skills. As long as this remains the case, the American economy will not be operating at its full potential. For example, take medicine. If a doctor arrives to the United States as a refugee, they must complete three exams, clinical work, and a multi-year residency program, regardless of previous experience (Pecher, 2018). Barriers such as these either sideline or completely remove talented workers from the economy. In the Pecher article, a doctor from Iraq is selling hotdogs at baseball games. While this work has some economic benefit, it is clear that the U.S. would be better off with this man in the healthcare system. The Commonwealth has financial incentives in fixing this problem as well; more taxpayers working in higher paying professions would allow for more state income tax revenue to be collected.

TANGIBLY WORSE LIFE OUTCOMES FOR REFUGEES

The transition to a new country and culture is already difficult; the barriers to gainful employment only make this learning curve even steeper. There is ample evidence that underemployment, defined as not having access to a job that matches your skillset, contributes to depression, suicidal ideation, and alcoholism among other worrisome health outcomes (Dooley et al., 2000; Lacmanovic et al., 2016). With post-traumatic stress disorder already a more prominent health risk for refugees, disproportionate effects of underemployment compound refugees' risk of mental and physical health problems (World Health Organization, 2018). Individual refugees may lose a sense of purpose without the ability to do work that is meaningful to them. Not only this, but the issue compounds on itself. Depression leads to lack of motivation to integrate into society, which leads to isolation, which furthers depression, and the cycle continues (Strang & Quinn, 2014). Figure 2 is a visualization of how this cycle perpetuates itself. The human costs of underemployment are real, and they impact the most vulnerable people.

FIGURE 2: THE REFUGEE UNDEREMPLOYMENT CYCLE

BRITTLE PUBLIC HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE

The loss of skilled refugee labor does not simply damage abstract economic indicators; it contributes to tangible failures in specific industries. A case in point is the coronavirus pandemic. Public health messaging in the early months of the pandemic focused on “flattening the curve” so as not to overwhelm America’s healthcare infrastructure (Carroll, 2020). One aspect of the health infrastructure is the human capital of doctors and nurses. Having an adequate number of healthcare professionals is essential, and yet refugee doctors have been relegated to aiding nasal swab testing at best (Baker, 2020). This consequence is one of many aspects of the disastrous initial response to COVID-19 by the U.S. government. Even the emergency aid provided by refugee doctors during the COVID-19 pandemic is done with temporary licenses (Schafer, 2020), intended to help America get through the peaks of the pandemic before things can go “back to normal”. Medicine is just one area where the failure to capitalize on the refugee workforce has resulted in unnecessary costs to people beyond the refugee population.

COSTS

Estimating the cost of missed labor is a difficult task (Lacmanovic et al., 2016), and there is a dearth of data for refugee specific populations. However, we can estimate using metrics developed for the workforce at large. An analysis by the Migration Policy Institute broke down the metrics of underemployment in two dimensions: foregone earnings and foregone taxes. The report finds a staggering \$39.4 billion in annual foregone wages due to “low-skilled”¹ employment. To put this into

¹ “High” and “low” skilled is the preferred nomenclature of the employment literature, so it is used here. However, it should be noted that this does not impart value on any particular profession. Absent a similarly functional term, high and low skilled will be the language used.

context, this is roughly equivalent to the amount immigrant-led households in Virginia collectively earned (\$36.5 billion) in 2014 (Batalova et al., 2016). This is a massive loss of income as refugee families attempt to start their new life in America. In terms of lost tax revenue, this leads to a loss of \$10.2 billion: \$7.2 billion in federal and \$3 billion in state/local taxes. Batalova et al. give reason for these numbers to be seen as *conservative* as well, due to the analysis not counting unemployed migrants. While this study does not directly estimate the costs to Virginia, it does provide a range for which we can begin to form a reasonable estimate. Given that the U.S. State Department data shows that just over 20,000 refugees have emigrated to Virginia since 2002, the combination of lost wages and tax revenue just for refugees in the Commonwealth has the potential to be staggering if a large portion of those refugees were underemployed. In the coming Findings section, there is an estimate of the cost based on the available data, but a more rigorous approach to find the specific numbers for Virginia should be sought out or commissioned. However, if the Batalova numbers are anywhere near the true value, then Virginia is leaving a huge swath of money on the table by not investing in its refugee workforce. This valuation can be understood as the cost of the “status quo,” or implementing no policy changes at all.

EQUITY

This problem impacts an already disadvantaged group, refugees, in a disproportionate way. The current labor laws on the books were not written with refugees or migrants in mind, and thus the disproportionate harm ends up afflicting them. The barriers to entry in “high status”² occupations are uniquely challenging for recent migrants (Krahn et al., 2000). However, it is important to note that refugees (and migrants in general) are not a monolith; even within this group, there are gradients to who is impacted the most. By narrowing the scope of the analysis, this report is already focusing on a subsection of the total refugee population: workers who face barriers to employment that matches their skillset. This is not to diminish the barriers faced by refugees with fewer technical skills, but simply to say that this problem specifically afflicts refugees who come in with certain professional skills.

One of the major considerations within this group should be the differing impact based on mental health. As mentioned in the Consequences section above, refugees who suffer from PTSD are more susceptible to the negative health consequences of underemployment (World Health Organization, 2018). Refugees who fled particularly violent situations or had a journey that put them at an exceptionally high risk for further trauma are more likely to see negative outcomes from underemployment, and screening capacity should be enhanced to detect these subgroups (Tufan et al., 2012). The literature also found that people without a strong support system are more susceptible to the effects of depression, alcoholism, etc., so a focus should be paid to refugees who arrive without family members or prior connections in the States (Lacmanovic et al., 2016). Finally, the gender wage gap does not disappear when discussing refugees. Women receive even lower pay when they are unable

² “High status” being a direct quote from Krahn et al. which they use interchangeably with “highly skilled”

to find skills-appropriate employment, and methods to decrease this disparity should be considered in any policy alternatives (Batalova et al., 2016).

Finally, it would be a terrible oversight to not mention the racial component of refugee job equity. Refugees largely come from groups that are minorities in America, whether that is an ethnic, religious, or other minority. Recent protest movements in the U.S. have brought racial discrimination to the forefront of policy discussion, a topic that academic literature has been evaluating for decades now (Umamaheswar & Tran, 2020). Refugees are not magically immune to these same forces that have roiled the country, and underemployment of refugee professionals can and should be viewed through this racial lens. It is not only Black refugees who face the brunt of racism; Asian refugees and Asian-Americans have faced a rise in hate crimes since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, with the disease mockingly referred to as the “China Virus” or “Kung Flu” (Rogin & Nawaz, 2020). The rise in hate crimes against Asians and Asian-Americans over this period has become so pervasive that it has spawned an entirely new social movement: #StopAsianHate (Yam, 2021). Muslims have also been faced with discrimination in a largely Protestant Christian nation (Masci, 2019). To ignore these facts is to see an incomplete picture of what refugees face in acclimating to America, and once again reinforces the need to look at each refugee’s experience individually and holistically. It was stated in the first paragraph, but bears repeating here: refugees are not a monolith.

EXISTING EVIDENCE

The good news for this problem is that other states have created roadmaps that Virginia can use as a model for their own underemployment reduction plans. States like California (California Immigrant Policy Center, 2017) and Maine (Weed, 2019) both have developed comprehensive refugee workforce policies in the past few years. While these policies cannot simply be copied verbatim in Virginia, they do set a roadmap and show that these policies are politically feasible across states with varying political ideologies and geographic locations. There is no “one size fits all” solution; varying tactics from licensing reform, English language training, and provisional employment are all on the table to solve this problem. It is unlikely that any one of these policies will be a silver bullet, but rather the most effective combination of them under the constraints of Virginia’s budget will have to suffice.

TWO APPROACHES: TARGETED VERSUS UPSTREAM

Before attempting to solve the problem of refugee underemployment, first there must be an understanding of what policy solutions have already been tried. Attempts to address refugee workforce issues typically fall under two types of solutions: deregulation of bureaucratic red tape and programs to lower overall barriers to employment. The first aims to lower structural barriers within certain professions. For example, expedited medical licensing, waiving of residency requirements, or rewriting of plumbing certification laws would fall under this umbrella. The second options take a “raising all ships” approach, advancing programs like ESL that aid in integration when immigrating to a new country for any refugee. This upstream approach to reform aims to empower refugees before they

enter the labor market. While this literature review will consider both approaches, it is imperative to note from the start the state of evidence for specialized refugee labor.

The reality of the literature is that, as of the writing of this report, there is little academic background in specific programs targeting refugee licensing reform. This has been a blind spot of the literature for a good while, with complaints about substandard analyses being run as far back as the 1970s (Stein, 1979). Consequences of limited refugee occupational mobility have remained mostly theoretical, with a lack of concrete policies to even run analyses on. The state of California just signed a bill into law that provides expedited licensing for refugees, but this happened only in September 2020 and is still awaiting implementation (Newsom, 2020). In the face of these limitations, data from reasonably comparable situations will be utilized.

CASE STUDY: LESSONS FROM CANADA

The strongest evidence on refugee underemployment comes from Canada, where numerous studies showed how “highly skilled” refugees are faced with “occupational downgrading” in heavily regulated fields (Banerjee & Phan, 2014; Augustine, 2015). While not a perfect comparison to the U.S., the results of these studies show how high skilled refugees arrive in a new country with little opportunity to rejoin their original profession, or a profession of similar prestige/earning potential. These studies show the very nature of the problem, from lost earnings specifically stemming from the differences in regulated professions (those that have licensing, accreditation, etc.) and unregulated professions. There is not the same level of rigorous studies that have been conducted on American regulated and unregulated professions, but the proof of the Canada case study is that in developed countries, differences in regulation can lead to material differences in professional outcomes. Banerjee & Phan in particular utilize a fixed effects model to show that highly regulated occupations saw a decrease of 22 percentage points in “Initial Relative Occupational Status Score”, a measure of how prestigious or desirable a certain occupation is, based on the Nam-Powers-Boyd scale. This scale comes from aggregate educational and earning data and is the preferred method of determining occupational desirability over a simple survey. The methodology of this and the Augustine occupational downgrading study are relatively rigorous, though it must be once again noted that they consider the Canadian context and thus cannot be directly extrapolated onto the American job market. Recommendations of expediting licensing are put forward, echoing similar calls from refugee advocates and economists alike (Paul, 1984). How effective this expediting licensing is should be the study of further research, but the Canadian studies are currently viewing it as the primary policy solution to this problem.

GENERAL EFFECTS OF LICENSING REFORM

Work on licensing reform more broadly also provides insight. A seminal study from 1984 showed that licensing practices raised physician salaries without any statistical improvement in patient health outcomes (Paul, 1984). Paul’s argument is not that physicians are greedy or against their patients’ interests, just rather that licensing practices generate revenue for medical associations that is disproportionate to the stopgap they provide against medical malpractice. There is research supporting this conclusion from a variety of points on the political spectrum. More recent studies from analysts

at the conservative Heritage Foundation note that similar countries such as Australia, Canada, and the members of the European Union have expedited licensing for foreign doctors and have not seen declines in quality or rises in malpractice suits (Dayartna et. al, 2019). The Dayartna study borrows heavily from other statistical analyses (Paul, 1984), but their summation of the state of licensing reform echoes the general trends shown across the field and brings forth concrete recommendations concerning licensing for foreign doctors. Indeed, there have been calls for everything from licensing across state borders to the aforementioned expedited licensing practices to changes in residency requirements (Steinbrook, 2014; Prober et. al, 2016). These studies predict large economic gains thanks to these policies, but it should be noted that these reforms are subject to a number of assumptions, namely the regulatory burden that things like interstate licensing would be subject to. This would depend on the federal government's posture on foreign labor, which is subject to change based on the current occupant of the White House.

On another note, the focus so far has been on medical licensing, but the lessons are applicable across a wide variety of high skilled jobs such as engineers and pharmacists. The reality is that the majority of the current literature focuses on doctors, so that is what will be primarily discussed here. Regardless of the logistical hurdles, the main takeaway is that reform of licensing practices that allow for more foreign-born labor to enter the workforce is low risk. These studies do not specifically single out refugee clients but considering that refugees and SIV holders are held to the same standard as any other immigrant group for licensing, the takeaways should still apply to them.

UPSTREAM SOLUTIONS

The alternate path to bolstering the refugee workforce is to invest in areas that are already a part of the arrival process, like ESL classes. Broadly speaking, English language acquisition is a strong predictor of refugee wellbeing and happiness in a new country (Tip et. al, 2018). This affects job prospects as well. Previous surveys have shown language acquisition to be one of the largest barriers to refugee hiring and a major predictor of future wages, regardless of previous educational attainment (Mamgain & Collins, 2003). While these studies have not specifically narrowed in on certain occupations, there is no reason to believe that this trend would not also apply to more skilled positions as well. However, further study on this topic is needed before simply assuming this conclusion.

These upstream interventions need not be limited to language training. Vocational training in the home, information about financial services, and other broader social programs have been utilized to aid refugees to great effect in countries like Jordan and Ethiopia (Brown et. al, 2018; Archer, 2017). While these studies are well designed and measure what they set out to, the complication of specific focus in high skill occupations remains the same as other studies mentioned in this report. Namely, there is a concern about power; given that the quantitative methods sections did not attempt to specifically study highly skilled occupations, we cannot be sure that there is a sufficient number of them in the study to draw conclusions from. Still, we can observe that the general trend is upward, so there is a near certainty that vocational programs are not hurting refugee's job prospects, simply further research will be needed that either specifically focuses on highly skilled occupations or specifically stratifies by occupational prestige (on a metric similar to the Nam-Powers-Boyd scale

mentioned in the ‘Lessons from Canada’ section). Regardless, it is clear that this language and skills-based training has some value, the more difficult step is to quantify this value relative to other interventions.

Finally, upstream solutions also attempt to tackle problems of discrimination and xenophobia as described above in the “Equity” section. For example, Sweden attempted to solve their refugee employment problems by changing the incentive structures for the private sector. This took the form of a subsidy program called the “100 Club”, where companies that hired 100 refugees over a three-year time frame were eligible for a government subsidy. While there have been no rigorous studies about the efficacy of this program, internal reports showed that 31 companies took advantage of the program. This was with limited marketing and official government investment, so scaling up the program could bring even greater rewards. If the primary barrier to refugee integration to the high skilled workforce is bias, then this sort of program would be worth considering.

POLICY ALTERNATIVES

The following three policy alternatives aim to lessen refugee underemployment, each taking a different approach informed by the literature. The first two alternatives deal with the targeted and “raise all ships” approaches, with the third approaching it from an equity lens.

ALTERNATIVE 1: TARGETED REFORM OF PROFESSIONAL LICENSING

The first potential solution would be targeted amendments of professional licensing codes to allow for quicker refugee integration into the workforce. For example, Chapter 29 of Title 54.1 of the Code of Virginia deals explicitly with who is licensed to practice medicine in the Commonwealth. Refugees are able to be granted temporary licenses under current provisions, yet the path to full licensure is only through multiple years of schooling and residency stateside. These differing standards of licensing are not just for doctors; professions from attorneys (Chapter 39 of 54.1) to general contractors (Chapter 11 of 54.1) are affected as well. This alternative would call for proper amendments to expedite the licensing process for refugee professionals. This includes expedited paths to full licensure following temporary or provisional licensing for refugees, review of residency requirements, and other profession-specific barriers that are encountered in the review process. The stated goal would be to break down the bureaucratic red tape that both dissuades refugees from entering the profession stateside and traps those who do in a long and arduous process. The exact wording of these reforms would need to be drafted and approved by legal counsel and reviewed by professionals in the relevant fields, but the outcome of these reforms should be easier entrance into the workforce for refugees. CWS would focus lobbying efforts in the Virginia Assembly on these reforms, partnering with representatives like Del. Kathy Tran who have passed refugee-related legislation in the past.

There are several challenges in evaluating this alternative. It is unclear exactly what proportion of Virginia’s refugees fall into the professions that have licensing requirements, and even more uncertain what percentage of those refugees wish to return to their original profession. Any evaluation of benefits must take into account imperfect take-up of these expedited licenses.

ALTERNATIVE 2: EXPANSION OF ESL PROGRAMMING

The second solution would be an expansion of English curriculum in the essential services provided during refugee resettlement. Currently, ESL resources are provided as part of the essential services package mentioned in the background; in theory going to English class is as essential as registering for Social Security or learning how the bus system works. In reality, there are few requirements and is largely dependent on local funding. As a general rule, newly arrived refugees learn “survival” English—how to navigate public transit, basic communication skills, etc. Yet “survival” English is often not enough; many prominent voices in the literature assert English skills as the primary determiner of obtaining a job for immigrants. This policy alternative would propose a more comprehensive ESL program be embedded into the essential services provided by resettlement agencies with the aim of making English skills as strong as possible. Refugee resettlement agencies and their partner ESL organizations would receive additional government funding to hire more instructors and offer more advanced classes beyond the “survival” ESL promoted in the status quo. This mandate would create an accountability structure for refugees, since their case manager would be involved in ensuring their attendance during the first 90 days. Of course, language acquisition takes longer than three months, but programs already exist that provide services to special cases, as defined by case managers, beyond the initial resettlement period. A coalition between extended term case managers and existing ESL structures would be facilitated with these additional funds.

The major area of concern will be how new programming straddles the line between state and federal advocacy efforts. The problem statement clearly articulates a Virginia focus, yet the sum of funds needed for an appropriate level of expansion is likely only able to be allocated from the federal government in some form of grant. Additionally, there is a subset of refugees who arrive on Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs). These refugees typically have refined English language skills through work as translators for the US Military, which is how they secured immigration to the US. SIV clients would be unlikely to benefit much from an expansion of ESL programming. This additional programming would be made optional or with an easy opt out option for fluent English speakers, so that scarce resources are not utilized on people they will not benefit. Just because ESL training would not benefit SIV clients in particular does not doom this alternative overall; it could well be the case that SIV clients already utilize their English skills and end up with better employment outcomes. There is little data on this, but if English skills are the primary barrier to gainful employment, it would make sense.

ALTERNATIVE 3: ESTABLISHMENT OF INCENTIVE BASED SUBSIDY PROGRAM

The third alternative is to incentivize businesses to invest in the refugee workforce via direct subsidies. This program could take on two possible forms, which we will call the Sweden model and the NFL model. Both would be modeled after diversity initiatives undertaken in established organizations, with tweaks made to be relevant for refugee populations. The programs would be designed as follows:

Swedish Model: Taking after the “100 Club” policy adopted by the Swedish government, this subsidy program would give direct cash transfers to companies that hired a certain number of refugees over a set time period. In Sweden, this took the form of 100 refugees over three years, but the program could

be adjusted as necessary to fit the needs of Virginia's companies, or even be case-specific based on the size of the company.

NFL Model: This past offseason, the National Football League (NFL) implemented an addendum to the Rooney Rule, which requires a minority candidate to be interviewed in all coaching searches, that allowed for draft pick compensation to teams that had minority coaches hired away to other teams. For example, when the New York Jets hired San Francisco 49ers defensive coordinator Robert Saleh to be their next head coach, the 49ers received two third round draft picks as compensation (Espinoza, 2021). The refugee subsidy program would function similarly; by investing in refugee labor, companies would be eligible to receive compensation if their workers are hired away.

If the problem with refugee workforce development is an inherent bias against foreigners or racial minorities, this system could be a brute force way of overcoming this bias without relying on more controversial (and possibly unconstitutional) methods such as quotas. Either subsidy program would allow for the original employer to receive a benefit for employing refugee talent, with no strings attached (i.e. no cost to the company for participating). There are of course subtle differences; the Swedish model would operate over a defined time frame, while the NFL model would require a defined number of years of professional development, perhaps in specifically designed fellowships. The obvious candidates for these types of positions are in the business world, as corporate America has a defined hierarchical structure that would remove ambiguity about what constituted a "promotion". A similar system could be set up in hospitals, law offices, and other high skilled professional settings. CWS would work on *grasstops*³ lobbying of businesses to enter into this program, in order to present a stronger case to the Virginia Assembly.

This is the most complex of the proposed alternatives, and as such requires a great deal of care when considering. Implementation may take some time, and there would need to be some sort of public awareness campaign so that companies actually took advantage of the policy. Even if the program becomes firmly established, there is little evidence for this type of policy beyond the controlled environment of the NFL or the small-scale implementation seen in Sweden. This program would be innovative, but it could prove a risky undertaking.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

The following criteria will be used to evaluate the three policy alternatives delineated above. Each criterion will be scored on a low-medium-high scale, with high being better in all cases except for cost.

EFFECTIVENESS

The first question of any policy alternative has to be: does it work? CWS must advocate for evidence-based policy solutions that will actually better the lives of refugees. **Effectiveness** is the criterion that

³ "Grasstops" lobbying focuses on key stakeholders and powerful influencers as opposed to "grassroots" which is aimed at mobilizing large groups of citizens

looks at how well the alternative increases refugee job outcomes. This will be assessed with job satisfaction score, happiness indexes, and income levels. Effectiveness will be focused on impact for high-skilled refugees, in line with the problem definition. This means that associated gains from a program like ESL will be scored in line with how well they impact the subgroup of interest, rather than refugees as a collective.

POLITICAL FEASIBILITY

After defining if a program can work, we look towards if it is possible. It makes little sense to utilize limited advocacy resources like time and money on ideas that will never become policy. **Political feasibility** analyzes the political environment to see if reforms can occur at this time. To operationalize, we look at public opinion polling, specifically focusing in on the political “worst case scenario”. It is well known that the phrasing of opinion questions in polling can have a massive effect on the outcome of a poll (AAPOR), so looking at how the least generous depiction of the policy polls will give a solid floor from which to work from. Comparing public opinion polling will also show both the salience (through what percentage of people have an opinion) and the elasticity (through the variation of polling numbers between surveys/phrasing) of the issue. Finally, there will be an analysis of the general political trends of Virginia overall, since legislation and advocacy efforts are aimed at creating change at the state level.

COST

While CWS will not be the organization making direct payments as a result of these policy alternatives, it is still essential to consider **cost** in any competent policy analysis. While cost considers the monetary gains and losses of each proposal, it also aims to capture the entirety of the policy’s impact. For example, it might cost money to expand ESL programs, but a potential increase in malpractice litigation could result from relaxed licensing requirements. Both of these are costs, even if they are not both direct initial payments. Valuation methods common to cost benefit analysis will be utilized to itemize these different types of cost into a single dollar unit. Costs for alternative one include potential malpractice suits and decreases in quality of life measures, using Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALYs) as a measure. Costs of not implementing include lost state income tax. For alternative two, costs would be staffing and resource costs associated with the additional hours of ESL instruction. For alternative three, the costs would be the state subsidies given out to companies. Additional research into indirect costs will be undertaken in the evaluation section, but the main takeaway is that all direct costs, indirect costs, and positive and negative externalities will be taken into account.

SPEED OF IMPLEMENTATION

This criterion measures how soon the benefits of the policy alternative would be realized. Solutions that provide quicker **speed of implementation** will be valued more than those that take years to see an impact. The value of speed is due to several factors. First, support for the refugee program is fickle depending on which party holds Congress and the Presidency. If a program needs four (or even two in the case of Congress) years before funding begins, it is fully possible for that money to be yanked away at a moment’s notice if control of power changes. Second, wealth gaps take time to close. If a

goal of refugee workforce development is closing historical wealth disparities, the sooner the policy starts putting money in refugees' pockets, the sooner the compounding effects of wealth can kick into gear. This is especially the case when milestones such as homeownership, which is a massive factor in generational wealth (da Costa, 2019), are reached. Speed will be operationalized on two dimensions: how long does it take to change the underlying law/statute and how long does the policy have to be in place for a return to come from the investment.

SENSITIVITY

In order to maintain CWS's reputation, it is essential to be transparent about the rigor of the underlying valuations a report is using for its analysis. While each of these alternatives have a basis in data, it is fair to say that the literature is still maturing, and the main takeaways are subject to change as more information is gathered. As such, the cost-benefit analyses of each alternative will rely on informed estimates rather than hard and fast certainties. By running **sensitivity** analyses, we will be able to see the volatility of the costs and benefits should our assumptions be off in either direction. Alternatives that are less sensitive to changes in inputs can be seen as "safer" in the sense that the cost-benefit analysis is more likely to be accurate. This gives additional strength to the alternative. Options that are more sensitive to changes in assumptions are tinged with uncertainty, and thus are riskier propositions for both policy advocates and elected officials.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATION

CRITERION 1: EFFECTIVENESS

LICENSING REFORM

Licensing reform's effectiveness can be measured in several ways, the most obvious being in wage increases for those who would be able to receive the license. Using state level refugee data and estimates from groups like Refugee Council USA, there large potential gains in wages associated with licensing reform (see Appendix at end of paper for all assumptions and calculations). This calculation results in a net gain of \$251 million in income over a 10-year period. This gain in income would result in not only increased job satisfaction (Dooley et. al, 2000), but also increased tax revenue for the Commonwealth. Taxing the increased income with the Virginia state income tax rate, the state would see over \$14 million of benefit.⁴

While these gains are significant, it is important to view them in the proper context. These calculations should be taken in as a topline number if every underemployed refugee were promoted, yet we know from previous research that only a fraction of refugees work in fields that require licenses at all. As such, we should view the eye-popping \$251 million number as an upper bound. In terms of raw numbers this means two things: 1. The median wage increase associated with licensing reform is higher than the listed numbers above, since the types of jobs with professional licensing tend to have higher

⁴ See Appendix for all calculations and assumptions

wages and 2. Fewer refugees will actually receive benefits from this reform. Since there would be big gains to a relatively small population, the effectiveness of the policy can at best be described as **medium**.

ESL EXPANSION

There is a wide range of data on ESL training's ability to impact language skills, and by extension, employment. One potential concern with ESL expansion would be take-up. Even if ESL is folded into the collection of essential services provided during resettlement, there is imperfect take-up of these services and only so much that case managers can do to encourage clients to attend these classes. The solution would be a design of an ESL program to fit the concerns of those participating. The most recent qualitative work examining refugees' motivation for learning English notes job advancement and self-sufficiency as two key factors in ESL take-up (Kisiara, 2020). If a program is marketed as a potential career growth opportunity, then take-up would be increased. The effectiveness of ESL expansion must be viewed as a sort of inverse of licensing reform. ESL training would be provided across the board to help any refugee who wants it. The most robust literature on immigrants' earnings showed an increase on average of about \$2000 for people with a college degree (Roder & Elliott, 2020). Using the same estimates of the refugee population from the licensing reform subsection, this could have an upper bound estimate of \$112 million in earning increases over a 10-year period and \$6.5 million in additional state income tax. However, we must also consider how effective this policy is at addressing the original problem statement. ESL training is important, but it does little to nothing to address bureaucratic red tape that might stop a refugee from entering a profession like medicine or plumbing. Given the problem statement sets out to address high skilled refugee underemployment, this sort of "raise all ships" approach might be good overall, but insufficient for solving this specific problem. Since ESL training cannot address the full scope of the potential problem, it too can only score **medium** effectiveness at best.

SUBSIDY PROGRAM

The subsidy program would be a novel policy, but there are similar policies with which to compare. The NFL program that this policy alternative would be modeled on has only one year of data since the changes to the Rooney Rule. This most recent hiring cycle saw only two of the seven open head coaching jobs went to minority candidates, while 11 of the 27 candidates who interviewed for positions were minorities (Maadi, 2021). This was a marked increase in minority interviews, and while the numbers look even better at the assistant coach level, the structure is not an encouraging data point for effectiveness. The 100 Club policy in Sweden provides another look. Sweden saw 31 companies take up the policy, benefitting 3850 individual refugees in the country (Deniz, 2019). Given the relative effectiveness of the Swedish model compared to the NFL model, it is clear that the initial construction of the program should incentivize hiring rather than professional development. If a similar ratio of refugees benefitted in the Commonwealth as in Sweden, that would see a hiring of around 2000 refugees in Virginia. If these assumptions were to hold up to further research, it is easy to see a subsidy program being **moderately** effective overall.

CRITERION 2: POLITICAL FEASIBILITY

LICENSING REFORM

Polling on the specific issue of licensing reform is hard to come by, but there is precedent for its enactment. While public opinion polling regarding refugees is at a historic high (Sana, 2020), the specifics of this policy have not been polled by a large-scale outlet. What can be observed is that refugees in highly skilled professions tend to be perceived better than the median refugee. Gallup polling of countries that admitted high skilled refugees found those resettling countries to have higher levels of acceptance of refugees than countries that admit low skilled refugees. Since the refugee admissions process is largely random, this can be attributed to the perception of high-skilled refugees being markedly more positive. Additionally, refugees have been receiving more provisional licenses to aid in the COVID-19 pandemic response. Considering nurses and doctors maintain some of the highest ratings in honesty/ethics (Gallup), some of this positive reputation would seem likely to stick to refugees. Refugees also have not caused a surge in malpractice suits, dampening any practical concerns that medical training overseas is woefully insufficient. While it is not a simple task to reform state law, the political indicators we can see suggest that this policy could be enacted. For these reasons, political feasibility rates **high**.

ESL EXPANSION

The biggest barrier to feasibility for ESL is the associated costs (addressed in the next criterion). While polling is nominally in favor of refugee admissions, there is scant polling about providing them resources when they are stateside. In general, the American public is skeptical about perceived “handouts” to immigrant groups, as push polling by right wing polling firm Rasmussen has shown. This aversion to expanding the essential services they receive may be a tall ask. Additionally, the current environment makes it difficult to hire high quality teachers. The COVID-19 pandemic has led many educators to leave the profession all together (Dickler, 2021), making recruitment a more difficult task than it would have been a year ago at this time. This is far from the hardest political case to make, but it is clear that what might have once been an easy ask is more difficult in the current circumstance. ESL training scores **medium** on feasibility.

SUBSIDY PROGRAM

The feasibility of the subsidy program is reliant on both costs and risk aversion. Among the three programs listed, it seems likely that this one would be the most susceptible to messaging about money or other scarce resources being “handed out” to refugees. Essentially, any weakness found in the ESL messaging is likely to receive even stronger pushback here, as this is a direct transfer of money as opposed to funding of teachers, who are politically popular (Gallup). Even a more nominally refugee accepting country in Sweden only ran their subsidy program for four years, before abandoning it. Given that the barrier is even higher than the medium-scored ESL training, the subsidy program receives a **low** political feasibility rating.

CRITERION 3: COST

LICENSING REFORM

The initial dollar cost of licensing reform is nothing, since the change in law would not require any additional streams of funding. Costs for this alternative must be thought of more broadly. First, a concern of opponents of licensing reform is patients' rights, essentially the idea that malpractice suits would increase due to lowering of standards. There are varied reasons to suggest this might be the case, whether that is lower standards at foreign schools or refugees' not being fully acclimated to America when they practice. This includes not just medical malpractice, but occupational errors across specialized fields. However, there is no real cause for concern in the current literature. Given the low rate of incidence of errors (Orzylowski, 2020), and settlements being drawn from a small recurring group (Boodman, 2016) the additional cost of refugee professionals seems no more costly than adding any professional to the workforce. These considerations lead licensing reform to be classified as **low** cost.

ESL EXPANSION

The primary cost of ESL training would be the hiring of additional staff to implement to programs. Assuming an average salary of \$50,000 for an ESL teacher in Harrisonburg (per Glassdoor statistics), and the number of additional teachers needed at 16 (two per resettlement site), the 10-year cost of the program would be around \$5.5 million dollars assuming a 7% discount rate (see Appendix for calculations). Of course, there would be added administrative costs as well, totaling around \$1 million per year as an initial estimate. Finally, there would be required advertising costs to reach refugees where they are, including translations into multiple languages, physical ads to be posted in community centers, and potential additions to case manager responsibilities. These costs are quantified as **medium-low**, as the program is not very expensive, but still is likely to cost more than the nearly free licensing reform.

SUBSIDY PROGRAM

The obvious cost of a subsidy program would be the subsidy itself. For the purposes of quantifying costs over a 10-year timeframe, we assume a \$ subsidy each fiscal year when the hiring stage is complete. This tracks with the Swedish 100 Club program, since the NFL comparison (draft pick compensation) does not entirely make sense to port over. Using the number of working age refugees in Virginia over the past five years, ~8000, we can attempt to calculate what a potential cost could be depending on take-up. We calculate cost in two ways. The first cost accounts for the subsidy given a certain number of refugees being hired by a business. Considering not all 8000 refugees are highly skilled, wanting to change professions, or are likely to all congregate at one company, we can assume a likely max of 15 companies taking up the amount of hiring needed. These companies would have all costs in hiring the refugee populations covered, and this cost would be variable depending on the onboarding process. For example, provisional medical licenses may need to be covered for doctors while business professionals may require less investment. In contrast, the professional development route would delay the costs, since the subsidy is time dependent. That is, companies would have three years to complete the requisite number of hires, and the subsidy does not begin until they meet these

benchmarks. These calculations show that the cost of the program ranges from **medium to high** depending on final implementation steps.

CRITERION 4: SPEED OF IMPLEMENTATION

LICENSING REFORM

Licensing reform is necessarily a state legislative issue, and thus the speed it can be enacted is entirely up to the speed of the Virginia state legislature. Session for the Virginia General Assembly is something of a blitz, operating on a short timeline—just 60 days each January. As such, if an item is on the agenda, its implementation will be imminent; if not, the policy must wait a year unless a special session is called. Therefore, the speed of implementation is entirely dependent on how salient an issue refugee underemployment is. Given Del. Kathy Tran's previous introduction of bills addressing these sorts of issues (Rice, 2020), it is likely that the bill will at least be introduced during session. Given the uncertainty around this speed, licensing reform scores a **medium** on speed.

ESL EXPANSION

Learning English, like any language, takes plenty of time, and even the best English language teachers cannot fast track the process. The question becomes what level of fluency is needed beyond the first rounds of ESL class? Given the speeds at which most refugees are able to pick up foreign language due to cultural immersion (Henderson & Ambroso, 2018), it seems reasonable to expect a slow, yet steady, acquisition of English given increased course load. The classes would be able to start as soon as staffing is increased, so administrative speed is not as big a concern. Considering the challenges of learning a new language and the aid of ESL classes, this option scores **medium** on speed.

SUBSIDY PROGRAM

Subsidy programs would take the longest amount of time to bear fruit. Either model, the NFL or Swedish model, would be a long process where success would be measured over a period of years rather than months. The NFL model requires a minimum amount of time within an organization, at least one fiscal year by any design. Meanwhile, the Swedish model is set on the basis of hiring over three years. While it is possible for an organization to hire all the refugees before that timeframe, it seems unlikely that this would happen, absent perhaps the largest employers getting involved. Regardless of which path is chosen, it is clear that a long-term professional development subsidy program will take longer. For this reason, alternative three scores **low** on speed of implementation.

CRITERION 5: SENSITIVITY

LICENSING REFORM

For licensing reform, the major areas of uncertainty are the number of current provisional licenses and the increase in take-up after reform. The assumption made in criteria 1 acknowledges the 8% of Virginia physicians who have likely been admitted over the past five years and adjusts based on rigorous estimates of lost income and tax revenues (Batalova et. al, 2016). The exact calculation of benefits proves somewhat sensitive to multiple assumptions. The number of refugee physicians is assumed to be constant from previous immigration patterns, and the large increase in wages relies

heavily on Batalova et. al's estimate of nation-wide earnings loss. For these reasons, this alternative is of **medium** sensitivity.

ESL EXPANSION

The major source of uncertainty for ESL training would be the extent of the expansion. Would the classes added simply be an expansion of already existing advanced classes, or establishment of a completely new curriculum? Another major assumption is the addition of two teachers per site. There are eight unique hubs of refugee resettlement in the state, and two additional teachers per will hopefully balance out those that require fewer (Newport News) and those that need more (NoVa area). Additionally, administrative costs were a high assumption, however the price tag is small enough that these should not affect the analysis in too major of a way. This alternative therefore scores a **medium** on sensitivity.

SUBSIDY PROGRAM

Major assumptions are made in the calculation of a novel subsidy program. Changes in the value of the subsidy and assumption about professional organizations' take-up wildly change the expected value and cost of the program. The value for refugees employed was calculated by taking the five-year average of refugee admissions in Virginia and comparing to the five-year average of Sweden, then keeping that ratio for employment. Given these massive shifts in costs and benefits, sensitivity of the subsidy program is **high**.

OUTCOMES MATRIX

	Effectiveness	Feasibility	Cost	Speed	Sensitivity
Alternative 1: Licensing Reform	Medium	High	Low	Medium	Medium
Alternative 2: ESL Training	Medium	Medium	Medium-low	Medium	Medium
Alternative 3: Targeted Subsidies	Medium	Low	Medium-high	Low	High

Red represents the worst outcome, green the best, with yellow in the middle. Fusion colors represent if a policy option falls in between two levels.

RECOMMENDATION

The evaluation of the above criteria was weighted more heavily towards effectiveness and feasibility, followed by the remaining three criteria. This was due to CWS's position as an advocacy group; lobbying efforts should be focused on realistic programs that actually work. Based on this evaluation, I recommend **alternative 1: expanded licensing reform**. This alternative strikes the best balance of results and feasibility, all at a low price. It relies on a more stable body of literature than the subsidy program, while realizing results more quickly than ESL training. The heights of the subsidy program could be stunning, but it simply is too uncertain and politically volatile in comparison to more proven alternatives. With the subsidy program out, it became a comparison of licensing and ESL, with the more certain outcomes and lower costs ultimately giving licensing the edge. This is not to say that CWS cannot advocate for ESL expansion as well given its potential to do good, just that licensing reform should be prioritized in any future efforts.

IMPLEMENTATION

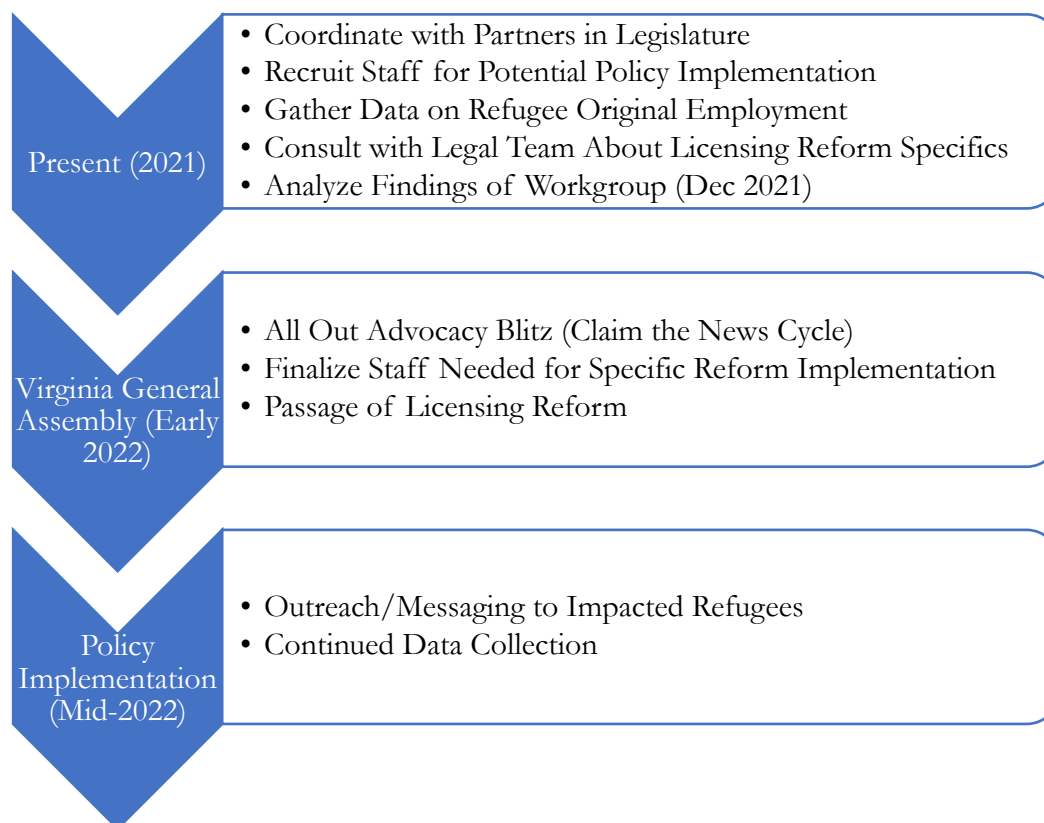
NEXT STEPS

CWS should immediately mobilize its allies in the General Assembly to begin drafting legislation for next session, which will be in early January 2022. Looking at previous co-sponsors of immigrant related bills, a short list of natural allies would include Del. Kathy Tran, Del. Danica Roem, and Sen. Scott Surovell (Tyree, 2020). With Virginia Democrats holding both chambers of the state legislature and the governorship, there must be movement in the short term to capitalize on this moment before a more hostile coalition holds the keys to power in the Commonwealth. The fruits of this majority were already borne out in the 2021 Special Session, where a work group within ONA was established to evaluate refugee workforce development. This work group is to deliver their findings by December 1, 2021 (Virginia State Budget, 2021), so CWS should remain ready for those findings to impact strategy for next session.

Within the organization, CWS should begin gathering data to fill the currently existing information gaps. For example, data on professions in the country of origin would go a long way in strengthening Virginia-specific arguments about licensing reform. This will be both retrospective (contacting current and former clients) as well as standard organization policy moving forward. The hope would be for this data collection to become standard across other resettlement agencies in the Commonwealth like Catholic Charities and the International Rescue Committee. Given that it is another year until the Assembly is in session, this is plenty of time for CWS to implement this data collection and return with an even stronger case in 2022. Additionally, CWS must take proactive steps to be ready for after the policy change is signed into law. Depending on the nature of the policy, this means hiring specialized staff who understand both outreach and the new legal requirements that new licensing standards would entail. In addition to legal experts, there would need to be subject area experts as well who know the ins and outs of the current licensing process. These specifications are expanded upon in the "Potential Implementation Struggles" section below.

A key for CWS in this process will be proper timing of an advocacy blitz. In the current national environment, the news cycle works at warp speed (Weeks, 2011); pet issues enter and leave the spotlight in the blink of an eye. CWS should begin small scale advertising and lobbying efforts with receptive parties in the short term before attempting to seize the main news cycle closer to the actual meeting of the General Assembly. Figure 3 below lays out these tangible steps for each step of the process.

FIGURE 3: IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE



STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

One reason that comprehensive licensing reform could be so politically salient is that it creates a stakeholder out of every citizen in the Commonwealth. Beyond refugee doctors, mechanics, and lawyers being able to make a living for themselves, their skills will provide tangible benefits to anyone who accesses their services. In this instance, refugee benefits help more than just refugee communities. This suggests the aforementioned messaging campaigns could and should focus on a singular Virginia made better by refugee's utilizing their skillset to the fullest. Additionally, professional organizations such as the Medical Society of Virginia, Virginia Automotive Association, and the Virginia State Bar have a vested interest in improving their respective professions' reach and quality.

Resistance would most likely come from right wing interest groups and politicians, especially given the GOP strategy of attacking Democrats on immigration in the Biden Era (Morin, 2021; Smith, 2021). The saliency of this is contingent on speed of implementation and future electoral results. Right now, the right wing is largely shut out of Virginia politics, and the Commonwealth has trended blue over

the past two decades (Tavernise & Gebeloff, 2019). However, demographics and trends are not destiny, and even a series of small GOP victories could make them a far more troublesome opponent to this type of legislative reform. This is especially true given the rightward drift of the Virginia GOP, with the party aligning itself with a Donald Trump “America First” disposition (Epstein, 2021; Oliver, 2020).

POTENTIAL IMPLEMENTATION STRUGGLES AND WORST-CASE SCENARIOS

Should licensing reform be signed into law, the devil would be in the details in terms of implementation. If the policy allows for more provisional licenses to be optioned into full licenses, it would be essential to message refugee populations about the shortened time frame. This would be the version of the policy that would be the most instant impact, since it would immediately change the status of a license with the stroke of a pen. If the policy grants waivers, refugees would need access to trained professionals to navigate the paperwork. In addition to these subject matter experts, translators would be needed to aid with any potential language barriers. CWS has access to translators, which have aided in previous licensing efforts like helping refugees acquire driver’s licenses (Schimmel, 2017; Wang, 2017). This version of the policy would impact the discouraged refugee doctors, and would move a bit slower than the optioning as a result. The specifics of what staff would be needed depends entirely on what shape the licensing reform actually takes, which will be dependent on the specific wording determined by legal experts. This wording was assumed to be outside of the scope of this analysis in the findings section, but the general realm of possibilities is likely covered by the types of staff mentioned above. Of course, this is all assuming the policy passes in session as well. It is difficult to say how likely the passage of licensing reform is in any given session; however, even if the policy fails to pass, the worst-case scenario remains the status quo.

In the event that this legislation is not implemented, there are several paths that CWS could take. First, what this analysis has laid bare is how complex the licensing system is in Virginia. Even without reform, CWS could dedicate specific staff to help high skill refugees navigate in this space. If reform of the system is not possible, mitigation becomes the top concern. Second, the aforementioned data collection should be pursued no matter the future legislative outcome. In addition to being a proactive step in the licensing reform arena, it could be valuable data both for future analysis and unknown policy battles down the line. Having this contingency plan in place ensures higher quality policy outcomes for refugees even if everything goes wrong—a solid basis for improving the status quo.

CONCLUSION

Refugee underemployment is a problem that permeates across the United States, and Virginia has a chance to be on the forefront of generating solutions. As it stands, refugees earn too little due to structural barriers to high-skilled employment. This leads to economic losses due to foregone wages and lower quality of life for recently resettled refugees. By changing Virginia’s professional licensing requirements, barriers to entry for high-skilled refugees in certain sectors would be lowered. This would result in major boons to the Commonwealth’s economy, totaling over \$14 million over 10 years

in economic terms. CWS can advocate for this licensing reform following the December 2021 report by the ONA work group in order for legislation to pass in the 2022 Virginia General Assembly session.

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APPENDIX

Calculations of benefits and costs were standardized to a 10-year period with a 7% discount rate, with the 10-year time frame being a discretionary choice and the discount rate being the standard of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Dollar amount assumptions are shown in the table below.

Description	Value	Formula/Reasoning/Source
Discount Rate	7%	OMB (https://www.wbdg.org/FFC/FED/OMB/OMB-Circular-A94.pdf)
State Income Tax Rate	5.75%	Virginia Tax Code
Refugees Admitted (Past 5 years)	8000	Virginia Department of Social Services
Refugee Physicians Admitted	640	New American Economy, 2020 estimates * refugees admitted in past 5 years
Assumptions for Alternative 1: Licensing Reform		
% Increase Associated with Licensing	18%	Kleiner & Krueger, 2013; Batalova et. al, 2016
Foregone Earnings per doctor	\$56,000	Batalova et. al, 2016
Licensing benefit per year	\$35,840,000	Foregone earnings * physicians from past 5 years
Licensing benefit (10-year)	\$251,725,162.43	Licensing benefit discounted over 10-year period
Licensing tax benefit	\$14,474,196.84	State Tax * Licensing benefit
Assumptions for Alternative 2: ESL Training		
ESL benefit per refugee	\$2000 per year	Roder & Elliott, 2020
ESL benefit (10-year)	\$112,377,304.65	8000 refugees * ESL benefit discounted over 10 years
ESL tax benefit	\$6,461,695.02	State Tax * ESL benefit
Median Teacher Salary	\$50,000 per year	Glassdoor Salary Average for Harrisonburg, VA

Number of Teachers Needed	16	Author's Discretion (2 per site)
Cost of ESL Teachers	\$5,618,865.23	Cost of 16 teachers @ median salary discounted over 10 years