



# Coordinating Social Services for Refugees: Improving Integration Outcomes Through Culturally Competent Practice

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## Abstract

Many newcomers (refugees and asylees), forced to flee their native countries, have relocated to the United States. In the United States, social service providers and those from resettlement organizations are responsible for program enrollment and follow-up with refugees who have already been resettled. As a result, these individuals encounter a substantial learning challenge. Despite having access to essential resources, many refugees remain unnoticed and unable to support themselves. This qualitative study examines coordinated services to enhance the understanding of the integration and coordination of services for refugees from the perspectives and experiences of eight social service professionals in the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, area.

**Keywords:** Acculturation, Adaptation, Assimilation, Coordination of Services, Cultural Competency, Cultural Diversity, Cultural Ecogram, Cultural Sensitivity, Economic Growth, Evidence-Based Practices of social service providers Working with Refugees, Integration, International Social Worker, Multiculturalism, Newcomer, Refugee Advocacy, Refugee Education, Refugee Employment, Refugee Health Care, Refugee Housing, Refugee Resettlement, Self-Sufficiency, Social Work Ethics, Social Work Practice, Strategies

## Introduction

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [1], individuals displaced from their native countries due to war, persecution, or conflict are referred to as refugees [1]. Forced to flee and unable to return to their countries, these newcomers arrive in a country with the intention of staying [2]. 123.2 million people faced forced displacement from their homelands, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [3]. Of this number, 42.7 million were officially recognized as refugees, although their status may ultimately lead to U.S. citizenship [3]. International social work addresses global social issues, particularly the essential resettlement of refugees when forced to leave their country of origin. Typically, migrants are not permitted to select their host countries or exercise any control over their relocation until they have undergone a rigorous vetting procedure [4]. Once approved, they are assigned to local resettlement organizations. Zong and Batalova [5] noted that the

U.S. previously accepted approximately 85,000 refugees annually, then tapered off to 45,000. In January 2025, the United States implemented a realignment of the refugee admissions program, suspending entry [6] and allowing a massive service-coordination gap for newcomers that would have enabled linguistically aligned services from individuals who spoke the same language. This shift in policy halted the resettlement process and the funding for many organizations within the Voluntary Agencies. The loss of federal support for many agency affiliates and nonprofit organizations resulted in under-supported service delivery, leading to challenges in meeting the needs of the existing refugee population. Despite policy changes, existing refugees resettled in the United States continue to seek coordinated services.

A coalition of resettlement agencies works to help these individuals attain self-sufficiency [7]. Support for these organizations comes from various sources, including the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the Department of State. Reception and placement programs aid the coordination of services for up to six months. After arriving in the U.S., refugees were eligible for assistance for one year, with an option for additional support extending up to five years [8]. During this five-year resettlement period, refugees could access various resources, including ESL classes, employment services, civics education, naturalization assistance, intensive case management, support for older refugees (65 and older), and cash aid. Additional support includes medical assistance and integrative programs to promote independence.

The recent alignment of refugee resettlement will cease admissions unless otherwise indicated as a case-by-case national interest to the United States [9]. At the same time, this decision will reduce the number of resettlements. Social service providers must understand and support recent and ongoing refugees, despite these changes. The UNHCR (2019) provides the necessary resources, including knowledge of international humanitarian initiatives. The National Association of Social Workers (2019) asserts that social service providers must prioritize the art of this

field of social science, which includes interventions designed to support and enhance community well-being. There are effective methods for resettling refugees, including training caregivers to prepare refugees appropriately, coordinating integrated services, and promoting self-sufficiency through education and a strengths-based approach.

Additionally, this approach teaches refugees practical living skills and enables them to build relationships with stakeholders, thereby gaining confidence through these interactions. However, coordination of services remains a challenge in international social work. This action research aimed to identify effective integrative strategies that social service providers used to support refugees in the U.S.

### **Cultural and linguistic information**

Dissipation of culture, linguistic challenges following relocation, difficulty acclimating to the new country's laws, and the acceptance of work and educational norms are all examples of post-migration challenges that can be addressed through coordinated and integrated services. Competent cultural practices form the cornerstone of engaging with refugees. Cultural orientation aids their preparation, and their eagerness manifests as gratitude for their new start [10]. The National Association of Social Workers [11] Code of Ethics states that cultural competency and congruence enhance the efficacy of treatment and service delivery. Social service providers must possess cultural competence to ensure successful coordination, dialogue about differences and similarities, and the collection and evaluation of refugees' background information. Several solutions streamline the data collection process to assist the refugee community better. Social service providers can gather family history information and assess the behavioral context, which was analyzed using the culturagram and cultural ecograms, respectively [12]. These methods enable social service providers to incorporate cultural sensitivity into their clinical practice [13] and mitigate discomfort arising from conflicts that often occur when a social service provider fails to understand the client's needs. This discomfort typically arises when social service providers fail to understand the needs of their clients [14].

According to Kanas, Kosyakova & Vallizadeh [15], linguistic alignment between staff and refugees is critical and helpful when resettling refugees. The linguistically aligned staff served as key components and trainers for everyday communication, which helped refugees navigate service systems and reduce the likelihood of becoming unengaged. When linguistic alignment between staff and refugees is present, it creates a conduit for dialogue and communication, allowing refugees to feel heard and build trust. Consistent and positive contact between staff and refugees increases comfort in their new environment, fosters positive connections within the community, and enhances the probability of successful integration and self-sufficiency [15]. Hokkinen & Barner-Rasmussen [16] also state that language-aligned guidance is beneficial in-service coordination because it helps refugees recognize successful strategies and become empowered to engage in meaningful integration.

Another technique that helps organizations collect data is digital storytelling (DST) [17]. Rooted in ethnographic research, digital storytelling aims to offer a deeper understanding of the community's culture by documenting it [18]. Digital recordings allow researchers and social service providers to witness a humanistic narrative of actual services, expectations, and client outcomes through real-life interactions with refugees. The Culturally Enhanced Video Feedback Engagement (CEVE) tool has also been utilized when working with families with children.

In recognition of the importance of cultural competency, social service providers and researchers rely on needs assessment to identify refugees' needs from their cultural perspective. Worabo [19] conducted focus groups with participants from Somalia, Iraq, Bhutan, and Eritrea, identifying themes that contribute to creating a positive

environment and practice for refugees. The results revealed cultural concerns, including a lack of requirements for cultural competency training and integrity, as well as a need for improved training [19]. Refugees struggled to understand the care plan and lacked trust in the judgments made by service providers because of their disconnection from the resettlement agency. These circumstances led to inadequate quality of care, significant service misunderstandings, and dissatisfaction among the refugees [19]. Social service providers should conduct more research on the populations they serve and offer assistance through a resettlement agency as part of best practices for cultural competency.

Lau and Rodgers [20] suggested that social service providers utilize their creativity to assist refugees and navigate the relocation process. Similar findings support the stance that successful refugee services require cultural sensitivity, which, when appropriately used, facilitates communication with refugees to elicit accurate information about their backgrounds and assists in maintaining the integrity and reputation of the social work profession [21]. Lau and Rodgers [20] also found that former refugees who have become caseworkers serve as points of contact, advocates, and bridge builders between the social worker and the community. This allows the social workers to focus on therapeutic communication and counseling. To provide additional assistance, the staff engage in coordinated and integrated tasks such as peer support, interpretation services, and modeling. Similarly, Dubus [22] also proposed collaborating with former refugees in social work treatments as interpreters to assist with assessments, support groups, and other social service needs. Because refugees struggle to adapt to their new environment, it is beneficial for them to be surrounded by individuals who have undergone similar experiences [23].

Macleod [24] also addressed the integration of migrants into a new nation, noting several social service providers' theoretical approaches to handling various refugee populations, including multiculturalism, assimilation, and acculturation. These ideas represent cultural and behavioral adaptations of individuals from different societies as well as individual social patterns that emerge from blending cultures [25]. Social workers must enable refugees to be proficient and at ease in two distinct cultures [20]. This approach will enable refugees to retain their culture and values while assimilating by adopting the customs and mindset of the host nation. Past Research recommended having diverse conversations when assisting refugees to not only understand their background but also provide refugees with support through intake and other investigation strategies to determine a successful plan, which may include counseling and support initiatives [26]. Social service providers should embrace multiculturalism to offer refugees a sense of acceptance, love, and belonging [27].

### **Expert Instruction**

Resettlement-related initiatives are more successful when social service providers are adequately prepared and trained in community practice skills for social work [8]. Through training, social service providers can acquire empowerment skills to enhance their capacity to help newcomers build self-sufficiency, reach their full potential, gain independence, and contribute to community transformations. Self-directed learning places the learning participant at the center of knowledge [28], allowing them to examine their values and develop decision-making skills. Assessing social work practices and sharing findings is essential to gain professional knowledge about what works best for this clientele [20]. Empirical strategies must be implemented when working with migrants [29]. These strategies include administering a needs assessment to precisely define the client's issue and conducting program evaluations to examine the effectiveness of the intervention [20].

Social service providers play a crucial role in addressing legal matters and supporting refugees. International social service providers have the necessary resources to comply with immigration laws,

according to Haider [30], who cited the National Association of Social Workers. To provide their clients with trust and information that will help alleviate anxiety, service providers need to be aware of and knowledgeable about refugees' rights. Practitioners should study and understand policies about child abuse, domestic violence, law enforcement, and employer exploitation [30]. Refugees' home countries vary and apply these rules differently. Therefore, social service providers must know the regulations to distinguish and educate their clients about these differences. To provide their clients with trust and information that will help alleviate anxiety, service providers need to be aware of and knowledgeable about refugees' rights. Practitioners should study and understand policies about child abuse, domestic violence, law enforcement, and employer exploitation [30]. Therefore, social service providers must know the regulations to distinguish and educate their clients about these differences.

To better assist refugees, social service providers should consider using a framework like family systems theory to understand community behavior better and recognize traditional customs and values, as well as the skills necessary for effective teamwork.

### **Motivation to Help**

According to the 2015 NASW Code of Ethics, social service providers are required to act and advocate for individuals displaced by war or violent conflicts, including refugees. Therefore, social service providers must coordinate services, including psychiatric or mental health services, to improve the well-being of populations in need of relocation, by NASW's ethical standards [31]. Psychiatric care is often regarded as inconsistent with the beliefs of numerous ethnic groups [32], which presents a challenge in treating refugees with this worldview. Therefore, social service providers must create a safe space to explain the treatment plan, acknowledge the differences between the refugees' culture and American culture, and learn about each client's culturally sensitive values [32].

### **Research questions and the purpose statement**

This qualitative research project investigates the coordinated integrative methods employed by social service providers who assist refugees in the US. It aims to answer the following research questions: Are there any particular procedures or service coordination methods that help refugees achieve better results? What practical resources equip professionals to support recently arrived refugees? What are some effective strategies for educating social service providers before providing aid to refugees?

### **Methodology**

This study's use of qualitative data is part of a broader investigation into the integrative nature of social services, resettlement services, and the viewpoints of service providers regarding the objectives, expectations, and best practices of refugee care. Eight social service providers from four relocation organizations in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex participated in a focus group discussion to gather data. Audio recordings of the focus group interviews were faithfully transcribed. During the transcription process, the lead investigator eliminated all identifiers to protect participant confidentiality. Convenience and the resettlement services provided by the city and NGOs were the key factors in the decision. Eight social service providers participated in this study because of its convenient and intentional sampling. We used focus groups and group interviews to gather data, which we then examined for thematic substance. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the principal investigator's university approved the study.

### **Sampling Procedures**

This study employed a convenience sampling method. The Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) metroplex was traditionally one of the largest areas for refugee resettlement in the United States. Social service

providers interested in the survey were contacted through voluntary resettlement organizations in the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) metroplex in Texas via phone calls, emails, and in-person meetings. We contacted the social service providers, selected them, and required them to complete an informed consent form before they could participate in a focus group. Eight social service providers participated in the study. Participants were required to be employed by a local resettlement program, be fluent in English, be willing and able to participate in the research project, be a graduate in social work or a related field, and complete the informed consent form. Although the study's sample size was small and focused on a specific geographic area, it highlighted important determinants that will aid in process improvements for refugee support systems nationwide.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data for the study were gathered through a focus group. The primary researcher led the focus group discussion and recorded participants' replies and reactions as they completed the items outlined in a questionnaire developed by the researcher. In the focus group contexts, the researcher uses notes from the questionnaire to support codebooks. Focus group sessions were held in the refugee resettlement offices of resettlement agencies in the Dallas and Fort Worth region of Texas, each lasting no more than an hour. Conversely, a discussion guide serves as a consistent tool. The tool allowed the researcher to focus on the preselected subjects. The discussion guide included open-ended questions to keep the discussion lively, engaging, and organized, preventing conversational veers. The primary researcher provided a handout with numerous keywords, social work terminology related to refugee resettlement, and skills and tools designed to keep the focus group and conversation on track.

### **Data Analysis**

Notes from the focus group were transcribed. These phases of analysis include the following: comprehending the data, focusing on the issue, categorizing the study's themes, recognizing connections between the material, and interpreting the context [33]. The researcher employed qualitative text analysis to analyze the data for this study, including the transcribed notes and the data included in the questionnaires. The process involves several steps, including data cleaning, analysis, confirmation and exploration phases, results stabilization, identification of statistical methods, and information presentation [34].

The researcher read the transcribed data twice, identified key concepts, and developed an initial codebook and codebook definitions to facilitate the decoding of the data. The collected data were examined using the codebook notes and the discussion guide on integrating social work practices regarding refugee movement. Reflective journaling was used to achieve confirmability. The primary researcher also employed inter-coding reliability, as various coders utilized the codebook to verify the identified themes. Next, the primary researcher organized and grouped the codes based on their relationship. At this point, potential themes emerged, were noted, and were reviewed for refinement several times. Three themes emerged: the desire and motivation to help newcomers, the coordination of social work through linguistic interpretation and translation, and the coordination of services through expert instruction for social service providers.

### **Participants**

Eight social workers who assist with refugee resettlement in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex were among the attendees. Of the eight participants, five arrived in the US as refugees. There were four ladies and four guys among the eight responders. They had substantial experience working with refugee resettlement organizations and held degrees ranging from bachelor's to master's. Five of the participants had worked in the region for ten years or longer. Two had worked in refugee services for seven to nine years, and one of the service



providers had worked in the social services sector for one to three years. Furthermore, three individuals worked in refugee services for 4–6 years, three for ten years or longer, and two for 1–2 years. Social workers, caseworkers, program administrators, and direct service employees working in refugee resettlement and adjustment roles were among the sample of social service providers.

## Findings

### Linguistic interpretation and translation

When working with refugees, participants emphasized the importance of speaking the same language as the refugee or having a caseworker who shares the same language. According to one participant, additional social service providers should take the agency's example and use linguistically aligned staff to console refugees. The group emphasized the importance of linguistic interpretations and translations in providing coordination services to refugees arriving in this nation. Such assistance would allow refugees to receive instructions in their native tongue. The State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration [35] mandates using the client's native language to facilitate understanding of the social worker's advice.

Consequently, Hokkinen & Barner-Rasmussen [16] suggest that multilingual staff have several positive perspectives. It allows refugees to set long-term goals that align with their career paths, offering a customized strategy that provides them with the potential to improve their integration outcomes. The positive agency relationship fosters an environment that supports their life decisions.

### Motivation to Help

Research participants noted that personnel must be willing to work with and provide the fullest potential assistance to a refugee client. They cautioned that people seeking employment should not enter this industry. The desire to support, empower, and change the lives of refugees is another trait that social service providers have in common. According to one participant, "refugees desire a sense of belonging just like everyone else." All participants believe hiring managers should seek people with experience, cultural competency, and sensitivity. Another participant stated, "How refugees were viewed and treated during their first 48 hours in the United States might significantly impact their success."

### Expert Instruction

The coordination of social services requires a level of expertise that is supported by refugees' perception of the participants as the experts on refugee community resources. One participant in the focus group stated that the refugee community speaks highly of the agency staff, particularly the social service providers, regarding their work with refugees. Another participant stated that they regularly seek ideas, training opportunities, guidance, and proposals from social service providers. The focus group participants concluded that establishing a robust forum for refugee providers was key to successful coordination. They suggest that the forums cover a wide range of topics, including missed opportunities and best practices in engaging with refugees, as well as services that could better serve the population. These tactics provide clients with culturally appropriate and skilled services within the refugee network.

According to the NASW Code of Ethics, social service providers must improve human well-being and meet everyone's fundamental needs [36]. The focus group determined the need for a learning curve for those working with refugees. Participants in the focus groups talked about these values. According to the NASW's Code of Ethics [37], social service providers have and continue to acquire specialized knowledge and understanding of the histories, customs, values, family structures, and artistic expressions of various cultural groups. The code specifies that one must be aware of the cultural background of the targeted population. The participant group exclaimed that the

social service provider positively interacts with the refugees if they possess the necessary skills or are willing to learn. To better serve the refugee population, the participants in the focus groups revealed that the engaged refugee community frequently meets. All participants agreed that positive service delivery is essential when working with refugees. According to Capps et al. [38], working with refugees requires special skills, aptitudes, and abilities for integrated social work practices. In addition to the interagency meetings, participants gather quarterly at the refugee forum summits.

Even when the services are managed appropriately, gaps exist in the coordinated service for refugees who speak rare languages. This situation creates cultural and linguistic barriers. Without linguistic assistance, it becomes more difficult for the refugee to maintain long-term employment and establish self-sufficiency in his new environment [22]. In some cases, it can be challenging to attract competent social service providers in the refugee field if they cannot accommodate the linguistic needs of a refugee [22]. One participant stated, "Having some direction from a staff member who is linguistically aligned is very helpful. It ensures basic instructions, can help with trust and hope, and offers direction towards community resource sustainability." They all concurred that the coordination services were challenging due to the refugees' limited literacy in their native tongue. Therefore, the need for advocacy, housing, healthcare, work, and education services became evident.

Capps et al. [38] studied advocacy efforts related to refugee-coordinated services. Hardy [39] reiterated the conclusions of the research focus group for social professionals and other caregivers who assist refugees. The traits and abilities identified in the research helped determine the service needs of refugees. The data collected for this study can help interns and social service providers who want to work with refugees. It provides an insight into the skills required to advance and better assist those escaping their nations and seeking safety in the United States. Others looking to implement coordinating approaches can use the findings as a guide to achieve positive results.

### Social Work Implications in Practice

This study supported findings in the field [36, 37] that show the necessity of guiding principles while working with families and individuals who have been displaced. The study also demonstrates the necessity for consistent integrative strategies to better serve the refugee community, which aligns with the literature [38]. To provide refugee assistance, social service providers must be diverse, sensitive, and culturally competent, according to NASW [11]. Social service providers understand the importance of training in these areas. However, the curriculum for social service professions has only recently included integrated practices that incorporate cultural competency and adaptation when working with the refugee community. Consequently, the unique skills needed to assist refugees present a significant learning curve for many social service providers. It is necessary to understand and be sensitive to the refugee's culture. The necessity of being culturally sensitive to the refugee community was at the center of the focus group's discussion about distinctive traits. The importance of being "culturally competent and patient" was underlined by the participants. If these traits are absent, the refugee may perceive the social service provider as not valuing diversity. Social professionals need to understand diversity to prevent discrimination against refugees and asylum seekers. The social service provider needs to know the refugee and be able to speak up for them to achieve the reception and accommodation goals.

### Implications of Social Service in Education

Social service provider professionals who work with refugees should invest in education and training to enhance their sensitivity, cultural competency, and knowledge. We advise the providers to advocate more effectively, empower their clients, and assist them in becoming self-sufficient members. The new community they are

joining could provide this educational support. Implementing instructional support for social service providers is essential. The aim is to teach individuals integrated practices, including diversity, cultural competency, and sensitivity, when working with refugees and other vulnerable populations. The social service providers decided to lead community talks with the local government, hospitals, employers, and the educational system. The committee concluded that the refugee population would gain from conversations on diversity, cultural sensitivity, and competency. Creating a positive rapport in the community will guarantee awareness. Networking opportunities brought about by client knowledge can promote successful integration.

### Policy Implications for Social Work

Peer-verifiable results and practical information are the outcomes of a successful study [40]. The findings of this study can be used to help organizations that provide services to the refugee and function as a guide for assessing optimal practices. To effectively support the refugee community, social service professionals must exercise responsive practices by building trust through language access, community engagement, and trauma-informed care. Actionable steps include conducting needs assessments, advocating for equitable access to healthcare and housing, partnering with refugee service organizations, and promoting self-sufficiency within the refugee community. Collaborating with refugee-led agencies and task forces that align with the linguistic needs of refugees will also help foster long-term empowerment efforts.

### Recommendations

The results of this study suggest that social service providers should employ staff who are motivated to help refugees succeed, linguistically aligned, and actively seek to improve their knowledge and skills. This can be done by establishing task forces to help identify professionals interested in working in international social work. The focus group identified traits that can serve as a foundation for the qualities necessary for success. Another suggestion is encouraging social work professionals to become change agents in refugee communities. In this way, the social service providers build relationships with community stakeholders. These connections help them locate resources for their clients. After they feel at ease in their new environment, refugees can focus on becoming self-sufficient within their community. Positive perceptions of the population would also result from educating the public about the positive contributions made by refugees. Support for coordinating refugee services will rise when the population is viewed as a resource.

### Limitations

Self-reported data are limited and can rarely be independently validated, even though focus group participants had a stake in the population they serve. The likelihood of attribution, or the act of attributing favorable occurrences and results to one's agency, is probably present because all agencies participating in the poll seek the same federal funding. Due to the sample size and geographic location, it was challenging to generalize the data to the broader population.

### Disclaimer:

This study involves human subjects and discusses sensitive topics, including public policy, government programs, and advocacy for marginalized populations. All-research protocols were reviewed and approved by the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. Measures were taken to protect confidentiality and minimize potential harm. The views expressed are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the positions of affiliated institutions or funding bodies.

**Competing Interest:** The author(s) declare that they have no competing interests.

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