

Refugee Problems Mounting

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Federal and private agency officials working on resettling Vietnamese refugees in the United States are alarmed over mounting problems between Vietnamese already released from refugee camps and their American sponsors.

Increasingly, a number of officials said this week, refugees who have been released in the sponsorship of friends, relatives or others are turning up on the doorsteps of public and private relief agencies without jobs or money.

"At this point," said Dale DeHaan, staff director for the Senate Subcommittee on Refugees and Escapees, "there appears to be a very alarming rate of breakdown. We're getting scores of phone calls from refugees and sponsors who have nowhere to turn... In all my 12 years in refugee

placement I've never seen a breakdown rate like this."

Several private agency officials and other staff members of the Senate subcommittee said much of the blame for the problems — called "breakdowns" by the officials—rests with the "direct release" program run by the federal Inter-agency Refugee Task Force, which has been overseeing the operation of the entire refugee program.

As the numbers of refugees began building up in the four large holding camps scattered around the country, task force officials allowed refugees with contacts among friends and relatives—and more recently with people who have telephoned in their desire to sponsor refugees—to leave.

Resettlement officials now contend

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American Red Cross photo by Barbara Isard

An unidentified boy holds a card from the American Red Cross identifying him as a refugee from Southeast Asia unfamiliar with "our language, culture and customs," and asking for assistance.

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many of these sponsors were not prepared to handle the financial and emotional burdens of sponsoring refugee families. Nearly one-quarter of the 45,000 refugees released from the holding camps are in this "direct release" category, officials said.

Instances of breakdowns — sometimes stranding Vietnamese families with a dozen or more members — include:

- In Denver, a refugee family of 15 showed up at the U.S. Catholic Conference field office after their sponsor, a Vietnamese relative married to an American, found she could not afford to feed them. The Catholic Conference split the family up in order to find alternate housing, and got them food stamps.

- A refugee family in Durham, N.C., called Catholic Conference officials at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., this week to complain that they were locked up in one room by relatives and let out only twice a day to be fed. Officials said they were investigating the case.

- A woman refugee was assaulted in Tampa, Fla., by a male sponsor who told placement officials at Fort Chaffee, Ark., that he was married and needed someone to work in his daughter's motel. Officials later discovered the man had been separated from his wife for years, and had no plans to put the 27-year-old refugee to work. She told authorities she thought she was legally committed to remain with him because of his status as sponsor.

"They [the task force] just dumped some of these refugees on the goodwill of the American people," said DeHaan. The Senate subcommittee sharply criticized the task force in a June 9 report, and plans to meet Thursday with federal and private officials to discuss the breakdowns.

The situation has become so serious that the task force two

weeks ago authorized the nine private agencies involved in refugee placement to use government money to pay the cost of refugee families from the direct release program who have been abandoned by their sponsors.

Neither the task force nor the private agencies have been able to compile figures on breakdowns among the sponsored refugees. However, private agency officials said the total is rising rapidly and may now slow down the entire resettlement program — already lagging far behind schedule — and add unexpected extra costs.

Task force officials maintain their sponsor program is going well. However, in recent weeks the release goal of 1,000 refugees per day has fallen off sharply, fluctuating between 400 and 800 refugees daily, according to DeHaan.

Elinor Green, spokeswoman for the task force, says there is no indication that the breakdowns are reaching alarming proportions. But, she said, they would be reported to the voluntary agencies first, and the task force would not necessarily hear about them at all.

"I don't think I've heard of more than two dozen, three dozen," she said. The voluntary agencies are responsible for checking to make sure sponsors are equipped to handle the burden of caring for refugees, she said, and the Task Force does not have the power to order them to check more thoroughly.

Private placement agency officials said they feared that federal officials might shove additional refugees out of the camps without adequate sponsorship in order to improve the appearance of the program and clear out the refugees before cold weather sets in.

They also fear that the increasing number of breakdowns will swell the number of Vietnamese who eventually will seek public assistance where they settle.

More than 400 Indochina refugee families have applied

for public assistance in the Washington area and clusters of refugees have filed public relief applications in Southern California.

The refugee task force, in its request in May for federal funds for resettlement, estimated that as many as half of the refugees in the United States may need some form of public assistance, ranging from Medicaid to direct financial support.

The estimate projected that the number of refugees seeking aid would average out to just under 42,000 per month at any one time after all the Vietnamese leave the camps.

Donald Hall, associate director of Migration and Refugee Services for the U.S. Catholic Conference, the largest of the private placement agencies, said this week that when the names and return-numbers of prospective sponsors have been parcelled out to private agencies by the task force, less than 10 per cent have proven to be in a position to take on refugees.

Hall said his agency had received reports from offices in Dallas, Denver, Boston and other cities where refugees showed up at Catholic Conference offices seeking help.

Wells Klein, executive director of the American Council for Nationalities Service, another of the refugee placement agencies, said similar surges of calls for help had been coming in from his agency's 28 offices around the country. "To some extent, breakdowns were inevitable," said Klein.

"But I don't think anyone planned for this sort of problem. I'm afraid this is where you're going to get your local community backlash."