

# The Cuban Refugee Program

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FOR the first time in its history the United States has become a country of first asylum for large numbers of displaced persons as thousands of Cuban refugees have found political refuge here. For the first time, also, the United States Government has found it necessary to develop a program to help refugees from another nation in this hemisphere.

The principal port of entry for these refugees has been, and is, Miami, and most of them remain in the Miami area. Many of the refugees quickly exhaust any personal resources they may have. The economic and social problems that they face and that they pose for Miami and for all of southern Florida are obvious. State and local official and voluntary welfare agencies in the area have struggled valiantly with these problems—problems of shelter, of food, of employment, of schools, of public health that are too much for any single community to meet. In keeping, therefore, with the traditional policy of the United States to grant asylum as long as they need it to people fleeing from oppression, the Federal Government has stepped in.

The national character of the problem was recognized by President Kennedy in the first month of his administration. In a directive of January 27, 1961, to the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, he asked Mr. Ribicoff to undertake the responsibility, effective February 1, "for directing the Cuban refugee activities now being conducted by the Executive branch of the Federal Government and to make an on-the-scene investigation of the problem within the next week as my personal representative. I want you to make concrete my concern and sympathy for those who have been forced from their homes in Cuba, and to assure them that we shall seek to expedite their voluntary return as soon as conditions there facilitate that."

Earlier, in November 1960, President Eisenhower had directed Tracy S. Voorhees to look into the Cuban refugee situation as his representative. Under the direction of Mr. Voorhees, a Cuban Refugee Emergency Center was established in Miami. The Center was financed from

the President's Contingency Fund under the Mutual Security Act and partly, at first, from private funds. In his final report, Mr. Voorhees reported that the refugee problem had assumed proportions requiring national attention and made several recommendations aimed at its solution.

## ESTABLISHING THE PROGRAM

Secretary Ribicoff's report to President Kennedy reemphasized the need for a comprehensive program of aid, and on February 3 the President directed the Secretary to take the following actions:

1. Provide all possible assistance to *voluntary relief agencies* in providing *daily necessities* for many of the refugees, for *resettling* as many of them as possible, and for securing jobs for them.
2. Obtain the assistance of both private and governmental agencies to provide useful *employment opportunities* for displaced Cubans, consistent with the overall employment situation prevailing in Florida.
3. Provide supplemental funds for the *resettlement* of refugees in other areas, including transportation and adjustment costs to the new communities and for their eventual return to Miami for repatriation to their homeland as soon as that is again possible.
4. Furnish financial assistance to meet *basic maintenance requirements* of needy Cuban refugee families in the Miami area as required in communities of resettlement, administered through Federal, State, and local channels and based on standards used in the community involved.
5. Provide for *essential health services* through the financial assistance program supplemented by child health, public health services, and other arrangements as needed.
6. Furnish Federal assistance for *local public school operating costs* related to the unforeseen impact of Cuban refugee children on local teaching facilities.
7. Initiate needed measures to augment *training and educational opportunities* for Cuban refugees, including physicians, teachers, and those with other professional backgrounds.

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8. Provide financial aid for the care and protection of unaccompanied children—the most defenseless and troubled group among the refugee population.

9. Undertake a *surplus food distribution* program to be administered by the county welfare department, with surplus foods distributed by public and voluntary agencies to needy refugees.

“I hope that these measures will be understood,” the President said, “as an immediate expression of the firm desire of the people of the United States to be of tangible assistance to the refugees until such time as better circumstances enable them to return to their permanent homes in health, in confidence, and with unimpaired pride.”

Overall responsibility for the emergency program was assigned to Secretary Ribicoff, who delegated to the Commissioner of Social Security the responsibility for organizing and coordinating the necessary services. The sum of \$4 million was allocated from the President's Contingency Fund for operation of the program in the fiscal year 1960-61.<sup>1</sup>

The definition of refugee, for the purposes of the program, is somewhat broader than that used by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Under the basic immigration law, when a person becomes technically deportable—after his temporary permit expires—he is ordinarily given a short period of time in which to leave the country. This is “voluntary departure.” If the person overstays that time, a warrant of arrest and deportation proceedings is served. For the Cuban refugees “indefinite voluntary departure” is authorized with no time limitation, and consequently no deportation proceedings are initiated.

## DEVELOPING THE PROGRAM

In keeping with the wishes of the President, the program for the Cuban refugees has from the beginning been designed to make full use of the resources of existing Federal, State, and local agencies—public and private—and particularly those agencies with experience in working with refugees. The total program includes aid to public schools in the Miami area, health services, employment service, resettlement, foster care for

<sup>1</sup> Additional allocations from the President's Contingency Fund have been made during the fiscal year 1961-62.

unaccompanied children, and financial assistance.

Maximum use has also been made of the resources within the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare—the Office of Education and the Public Health Service, as well as the Bureau of Family Services (formerly Bureau of Public Assistance) and the Children's Bureau of the Social Security Administration. Matters concerning employment, distribution of surplus commodities, and the certification of the status of the refugees have been handled by the U.S. Employment Service in the Department of Labor, the Surplus Food Distribution Branch of the Department of Agriculture, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service of the Department of Justice.

At the State level the Florida Department of Public Welfare acts as the agent of the Federal Government in administering financial assistance and welfare services for needy refugees and for unaccompanied children. It also distributes surplus commodities. The Florida State Board of Health aided in establishing the health program.

The Dade County school system has provided elementary and high school education and summer day camps for refugee children and an education program for adults. The Dade County Health Department has extended many of its health services to provide for refugee needs.

The voluntary agencies that have provided continuing service under the Federal Government's direction include the National Catholic Welfare Conference, the Church World Service, the United Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, and the International Rescue Committee. These agencies administer the resettlement service.

Other voluntary agencies—sectarian and non-sectarian, as well as institutions and individual citizens (many of them Cuban) have and are playing an effective role in all aspects of the program but particularly in the operation of the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center and in the resettlement program.

## SETTING PROGRAM POLICY

The organization and development of the program have been guided by certain definite policies. From the beginning the refugees have been considered not as intruders but as friends. Efforts in their behalf have been regarded not as burdens

but as opportunities for service to fellow Americans, to be given with understanding and generosity. Every effort is made to leave the refugees free to choose their own destiny and the place in which to work it out. At the proper time, they will be helped to return home if that is their desire. To relieve the pressure on Miami's overburdened resources, however, and to reduce the need for continuing financial aid, the emphasis has been placed on the desirability of resettlement in other sections of the country and overseas.

For those who find resettlement impractical and who, for one reason or another, cannot support themselves, provision is made for furnishing the necessities of life. Such help is given in cash and in such a manner as to preserve the dignity and pride of the recipients. The levels of help are in keeping with those provided United States nationals in similar circumstances.

Finally, it was believed undesirable to establish refugee camps or to provide any facility that might serve as an encouragement to perpetuate a refugee's dependent status.

In the earliest stages of the program, in December 1960, it was found necessary to establish a Refugee Emergency Center in Miami. The Center served as the catalyst required to produce a cooperative effort, without which there could be no hope of success. Here the talents and resources of public and private agencies were fused into a major cooperative enterprise making possible a valid assessment of the problem and effective action to meet it.

In the new and expanded program the Center has been continued as the focal point of the Federal program. Among other functions, the Center registers and obtains important social information about the refugees; provides, through the U.S. Employment Service, job counseling and job development services; coordinates the activities of the voluntary agencies and the special assistance unit of the Florida Department of Public Welfare; and serves as a central point for information. These activities, with a health clinic operated by the Dade County Health Department, are all physically housed in the Center.

## WHO ARE THE REFUGEES

From February through December of 1961 about 87,000 persons were registered at the Miami

Refugee Center. More than 16,000 persons have been resettled through the program; another 16,000 have relocated on their own initiative or with the help of friends. Even with the substantial numbers leaving the area, the refugee population in the Dade County area—more than 55,000 persons at the end of the year—continues to grow.

There are, of course, many refugees who do not register at the Center, and not all of those who apply for registration qualify for the status of refugee. Most of them do arrive in a state of destitution, but not all need or qualify for cash assistance. Out of every 20 registered refugees, 17 apply for and 16 receive some measure of cash assistance.

By and large, the refugees from Cuba are well-educated men and women. They come from every walk of life. More than a third of those heading a family had been in professional, semiprofessional, or managerial occupations; they are doctors, dentists, lawyers, engineers, architects, authors, clergymen, chemists, musicians, artists, and educators. Almost a third of the entire group had been employed in clerical, selling, or skilled work. Fewer than a fourth had no special skills or were semiskilled workers.

More than half the entire faculty of the University of Havana was reported early in 1961 to be living in or near Miami. President Kennedy, in his directive of February 3, expressed particular interest in this group. The "cultural and liberal traditions for which this faculty has been justly noted," he said, "represents a great inter-American asset, for their own people, for this country and for the entire hemisphere."

Three-fourths of the registered refugees are between the ages of 20 and 50—generally the most productive years. About one-fourth are aged 21–30; one-third aged 30–40; and only about 6 percent are under age 20 and 9 percent aged 60 or over. About 60 percent are men. Probably 25 percent speak English well or at least well enough to hold jobs in this country.

The refugees are proud and resourceful people. They maintain their courage despite the disruption of their lives. They do not wish to be objects of charity, and they apply for aid only in extremity. They are grateful for the aid they do receive, and in some hundreds of cases they have voluntarily returned at least part of the money paid to them under the assistance program. From

May through December 1961, for example, voluntary repayments totaling \$119,930 were received. During December alone, 874 refugees voluntarily repaid \$48,873.97.

## **RESETTLEMENT**

Resettlement is a difficult problem. It is not easy for men and women who have already suffered a sharp break in their pattern of living to strike out again and alone, in a strange country whose people speak a strange language. In the face of these and other handicaps, a remarkable job has been done by the voluntary agencies, upon whom has fallen the major burden of resettlement.

The resettlement service offered to refugees, by agreement with the voluntary resettlement agencies, ensures that at the place of resettlement they will have initial living accommodations, employment or, in some instances, assistance in finding employment, and other necessities that will help them in building a new and satisfying life in a new country. The cost of resettlement—including transportation, incidental expenses, and a service charge—is borne by the Federal Government.

By the end of 1961 a total of 16,532 refugees had been resettled; the average cost was about \$130. Refugees have relocated in all the States but Alaska and in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and 16 countries overseas. The largest numbers have found homes and jobs in New York State, areas of Florida outside Miami, New Jersey, California, and Texas. Puerto Rico has absorbed about 5 percent of all the refugees resettled, in addition to some thousands who have gone there directly from Cuba.

To expedite and increase resettlements the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center was reorganized in November 1961. A deputy director for resettlement was appointed whose sole responsibility is to coordinate the efforts of all the agencies already involved in resettlement and to tap all other sources not yet contributing to the effort.

In consultation and cooperation with the U.S. Employment Service the permanent staff of the Job Placement Unit was increased. In addition, for a period of some months the Employment Service is contributing the services of 6 bilingual specialists so that the job can get off to a good

start. This staff will undertake an intensive program of job interviews to pinpoint the present skills of the refugees, a concentration on matching of job skills to positions available around the country, a strong program of job promotion by contacting potential employers, and a stepped-up program of vocational counseling.

At the same time a program of information and publicity has been launched, independently and in support of similar activity on the part of voluntary agencies. The effort is to make the country aware of the existence of a large pool of skilled persons in Miami for whom jobs and positions need to be found.

A parallel information program is being directed at the Cuban refugees themselves. Here the object is to allay their fears about taking up, hopefully, temporary residence in some other part of the country or overseas and to help them make ready to adjust comfortably to an unfamiliar environment. The voluntary and public agencies, to do their part of the job effectively, aim always at improving the quality and quantity of the information given to the refugees about the resettlement offered and conditions at the point of resettlement. A pilot project—"One Cuban Resettles Another"—engaging the systematic efforts of resettled Cubans in assisting other Cubans to resettle, has been successful and will be expanded.

The rate of resettlement has been increasing gradually, although many refugees are reluctant to leave the Miami area. Existing personal associations, climate, fear of isolation, and desire for proximity to their homeland are given as reasons for their unwillingness to accept resettlement.

## **FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE AND OTHER WELFARE SERVICES**

Financial assistance is intended as a temporary expedient to tide over the refugee who is in need until the time he can take care of himself—hopefully by returning to a free Cuba but in the meantime by taking his place as an independent, self-supporting person in the economy of this country.

The Florida Department of Public Welfare administers, as the agent of the Federal Government, a cash assistance program to needy refugees living in Dade County and provides social serv-

ices to them and to refugee children living with parents or relatives. The program is financed by the Federal Government. In substance, the criteria for determining the amount of financial assistance given to the refugees are those set by the State for its own citizens similarly situated. Included in the financial assistance program is provision for hospitalization for obstetrical care and acute conditions, with a maximum of 30 days. In addition, surplus agricultural commodities are being provided.

Two modifications have been made in the general Florida welfare criteria. The original maximum of \$100 a month for both single-person cases and multi-person family cases was found to be inequitable. Accordingly, single-person cases now receive a maximum of \$60 a month, and the maximum for family cases is left at \$100.

The Cuban refugees are, on the whole, men and women who in their own country had never needed or received assistance. Having to accept aid is one of the hardships they have reluctantly assumed as "exiles for conscience's sake." Those who have left Cuba since December of 1960 could bring with them their clothing but little else. They could and can bring no furniture and only 5 depreciated pesos—worth perhaps 50 cents.

Here they must rent furnished quarters. They face the seasonal fluctuations in rentals that are normal in the Dade County communities. Because they have—literally—nothing, their unmet needs are, on the average, higher than the needs of others receiving public assistance.

Public assistance is also available at the point of resettlement to registered refugees who have been resettled through the initiative of the voluntary agencies working in this field. If a resettlement is unsuccessful because of health, for example, or failure on a first job, the resettled refugee is authorized to receive public assistance, at the expense of the refugee program, under the standards of the welfare agency in the community where he has been resettled. Assistance is denied, however, if a person refuses a reasonable offer of resettlement without adequate cause.

From February 27, 1961, through the end of the year, a total of \$8,451,308 had been paid in the form of assistance to the refugees. At the end of the year, 21,294 cases were receiving assistance. The average family payment was about \$90; single-person cases received an average of about \$53.

## HELP FOR UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

A substantial number of children, mostly between the ages of 5 and 16, have come to this country from Cuba, unaccompanied by their parents or others acting in the place of parents. Many parents prefer this separation to the risks involved in having their children indoctrinated with an ideology hateful to them.

These children are fully provided for under group care or in individual foster homes. The actual service in their placing and care is done by voluntary agencies, although the Florida Department of Public Welfare, acting as the agent of the Federal Government, gives general supervision. Every effort is made to ensure that the personalities of these children will not be damaged by their trying experiences and that they will be restored to their families at the first possible moment. Other children, who have become separated from their parents or whose parents are temporarily unable to provide for them, are being taken care of through the same welfare channels.

By December 31, 1961, the number of refugee children in foster-family homes or receiving institutional care had reached 2,309. About a third were being cared for in the Miami area, and most of the others were in homes or institutions in the eastern part of the country. The program has supplied care, for varying periods, for about 3,000 children. About 1,000 have been reunited with their families after a period of care under the aid program. Foster-care payments from the end of February 1961 to the close of the year totaled \$2,097,980.

## EDUCATIONAL AND VOCATIONAL PROGRAMS

The education program has been developed largely by the U.S. Office of Education with the collaboration of the public school system of Dade County. To ease the burden on the public school system of Dade County resulting from the influx of refugee children, the Federal Government reimburses the county for 50 percent of the cost per pupil, including the expense of providing and maintaining facilities for all those attending grades 1 through 12.

Adult refugees need instruction in English in order to fit more readily into the society of the United States and to qualify more readily for

employment. Accordingly, Dade County has been given additional funds to finance such instruction for more than 6,000 adults and to give vocational training to others. Funds have also been supplied for intensive English instruction for several hundred young men headed for the Armed Forces and for other adults—teachers, for example—whose special skills are in short supply.

Specialized courses in English and refresher courses in their own fields for doctors and dentists, as well as a small research project for economists, have been financed at the University of Miami.

Federal funds have also been allocated for making loans to Cuban students who would otherwise have had to interrupt their college work. These loans are made on substantially the same terms and conditions as loans to United States students under the National Defense Act.

#### **HEALTH SERVICES**

Refugees registering at the Center are screened for contagious diseases and are given consultation with respect to other health problems. A few cases of tuberculosis have been discovered and arrangements made for long-term care. Out-patient medical care is provided at three general hospital outpatient clinics, with Federal reimbursement at \$3 a visit. Emergency and corrective dental care is also provided.

Through the Dade County Health Department, other health services have been arranged, including immunization, maternal and child health services, and environmental sanitation supervision. Members of the Dade County Medical Association make home calls without charge when requested by the county health office.

#### **EMPLOYMENT SERVICE**

The U.S. Employment Service maintains records of the work history and educational background of all registered refugees. These records are used in an effort to match skills with available job opportunities away from Dade County. The work done in this unit is coordinated with resettle-

ment services, as noted above, to ensure the effectiveness of both.

Employment of refugees in the Miami area presents difficult problems arising from a surplus of labor and the effect on going wage rates of a substantial influx of a large number of additional jobseekers. Some public relations problems have developed, but on the whole public understanding and acceptance of the situation have been commendable.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The last previous large-scale movement of refugees to engage the efforts of the United States Government resulted in the Refugee Relief Program of 1953-56. Perhaps the best-remembered part of this program was the reception and relocation of the Hungarian Freedom Fighters in 1956. In no case was the United States the country of first asylum for the 190,000 persons who came to this country under the Refugee Relief Program. The Federal Government's role was largely limited to the issuance of visas to permit entry into the country.

The present Cuban program differs from that program in several substantial respects. The issuing of visas and visa waivers or the adjustment of the status of the alien is only the beginning of the Federal Government's role. The more important and more visible role is one of relief, guidance, and—hopefully—temporary relocation. The Federal Government is not only assisting the individual refugee but the burdened communities of southern Florida.

At the end of 1961, Cuban refugees were continuing to register at the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center at the rate of about 2,000 persons a week. Unless there are major changes in policy, substantial numbers of refugees will continue to arrive.

The handling of this situation can be regarded as a problem or as an opportunity for the United States. It is more rewarding to consider it as an opportunity to demonstrate this country's humane dynamics, competence, and capacity for constructive social action.