This research assesses the relationship between accountability mechanisms and the
mission-based services provided by nonprofit organizations serving refugees and immigrants in
America. Nonprofits today are feeling intense upward accountability pressures, as they are being
asked to justify both the services they deliver and their operations. Therefore, to comply with
funding and regulatory agencies, these organizations are integrating multiple accountability
methods and systems of evaluation. Accountability and nonprofit management literature as well
as practitioners suggest that upward accountability demands may inhibit the ability of
practitioners to engage in lateral and downward accountability activities and thus may negatively
impact activities seen as central to reaching the mission. This project examines accountability
processes in a nonprofit agency serving immigrants and refugees. In particular, it identifies to
whom the organization is accountable and the accountability mechanisms used in the case
studied. This research further focuses on the time requirements of those mechanisms, the
relationship between the mechanisms, and, finally, the impact of the accountability mechanisms
on the mission-based activities of the organization.

Nonprofits have historically operated in what was referred to as ‘the sanctified sector,’ a
sector that was above criticism; but times are changing. At present, it is not sufficient to have a
strong mission and nonprofit status, as nonprofit agencies must answer for their activities.
Nonprofit organizations must now incorporate multiple systems of accountability that address
outcome measurement and transparency in financing and decision-making. This level of
accountability, identified as upward accountability, is usually ensured through the use of
reporting, auditing, and monitoring activities. These mechanisms provide accountability to
funders, donors, and oversight agencies, and focuses on ensuring that financial resources are
used for the specified purpose.

While upward accountability usually is related to being held accountable, lateral and
downward accountability is linked to felt responsibility. Lateral and downward accountability, to
the nonprofit organization itself, its community partner organizations, and its
clients/beneficiaries, generally employ less formalized methods, and it is thus less clear how
agencies can realize accountability on these levels. In order to ensure accountability at these
levels, non-profit agencies must integrate methods that allow for assessment and evaluation of
accountability to lateral and downward stakeholders.

The academic dialogue regarding nonprofit accountability has centered primarily on the
demands of upward accountability. Yet, analysis of lateral and downward accountability
concerns is equally important, and could be more important, as levels of accountability are
perceived by some nonprofit practitioners as inherently connected to the mission-based activities
of the organization. To explore the various levels of accountability demands in the nonprofit
sector, this research uses case study methodology to examine Bright Star [a pseudonym], a
nonprofit organization that provides resettlement assistance to refugees and aid and support to
immigrants. Five major questions guide this research. First, to whom is the organization assisting
refugees and immigrants accountable? Second, what are the accountability mechanisms used by the organization assisting refugees and immigrants? Third, how much time does the nonprofit organization serving refugees and immigrants spend completing the requirements to satisfy upward, downward and lateral accountability measures? Fourth, how are accountability mechanisms used by the organization inter-related? Finally, do these accountability measures assist or inhibit the organization’s ability to fulfill its mission?