

Refugee Admissions and Resettlement in the U.S., Background Information

Refugee Definition

A refugee is someone who has fled from his or her home country and cannot return because he or she has a well-founded fear of persecution based on religion, race, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. For the past several years, the U.S. has admitted between 70,000 – 80,000 refugees annually to the U.S.

Overseas Processing

Step 1: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Refugees flee their home country because of persecution to seek shelter in another country, and most register with UNHCR. UNHCR conducts detailed interviews with each person to make an initial determination of whether the individual qualifies as a refugee. It refers persons who cannot return to their home country on account of persecution, or who cannot remain in the country to which they have fled, to a third country for possible resettlement.

Step 2: U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM); and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)

Upon UNHCR referral of a case for resettlement to the U.S., the Department of State, through Resettlement Support Centers, reviews the UNHCR case files and conducts intensive interviews with each refugee applicant.

A Department of Homeland Security/U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) officer then conducts a non-adversarial, face-to-face interview with each refugee applicant designed to elicit information about the applicant's claim for refugee status and any grounds of ineligibility.

The USCIS officer asks questions about the applicant's experiences in the country of origin, including problems and fears about returning (or remaining), as well as questions concerning the applicant's activities, background, and criminal history. The officer also considers evidence about conditions in the country of origin and assesses the applicant's credibility and claim.

PRM conducts biographic name checks for all applicants, and USCIS conducts fingerprint checks for refugee applicants aged 14 to 79.

USCIS grants final approval of refugee status and admission to the U.S. once the refugee has cleared the intensive interviews, medical screenings, and all required security checks.

Once refugees are approved for admission, the PRM funded Resettlement Support Centers request assurances for sponsorship from the national refugee resettlement agencies, which are non-governmental organizations. An assurance is a written commitment, submitted by a resettlement agency, to provide, or ensure the provision of, the basic needs support and core services specified in the Reception and Placement (R&P) cooperative agreement (described below).

PRM is the primary contact within DOS for the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.

Step 3: International Office of Migration (IOM)

The Resettlement Support Centers provide pre-departure cultural orientation to help people understand what life in America is like.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) coordinates refugees' travel to the U.S. The Department of State funds the international transportation of refugees resettled in the U.S. through a program administered by IOM. The cost of transportation is provided to refugees in the form of a loan. Refugees are responsible for repaying these loans over time, beginning six months after their arrival, although it is possible to request a deferral based on inability to begin paying at six months.

Refugee Arrival in the U.S., Responsibility for Placement Determination

Meanwhile, state side, PRM issues a request for proposals in late spring each year inviting participation in the Refugee Reception and Placement Program. As part of the application process, local affiliates of the national refugee resettlement agencies are required to consult within the intended resettlement community, i.e. community based organizations and state and local public agencies providing services to refugees, the state refugee coordinator and the state refugee health coordinator; about the ability of the community and its service providers to accommodate the affiliate's proposed number of refugees to be resettled in the upcoming fiscal year. Proposals should include evidence of community support for the local affiliates and for the refugee program. In addition, when PRM receives the proposals, the affiliates' local resettlement plans (abstracts) are sent to the respective state refugee coordinator for additional comment to PRM.

PRM makes the final determination about the number of refugees assigned to a national agency and each affiliate. Whereas the number assigned to the national agency is a fixed ceiling, the number to finally arrive at each affiliate may fluctuate. Any increase greater than 10% at any affiliate requires PRM approval.

Refugees are allocated to the national agencies at weekly meetings at PRM's Refugee Processing Center through a process intended to place refugees with close friends and relatives already in the U.S. and to maximize the use of capacity at each affiliate.

Supportive Refugee Services

1) Reception and Placement Services, funded through the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), U.S. Department of State

In FY 2013, PRM funded cooperative agreements with nine national refugee resettlement agencies to provide initial resettlement services to arriving refugees. The agencies agree to provide initial reception and core services (including housing, furnishings, clothing and food, as well as assistance with access to medical, employment, educational, and social services) to arriving refugees. These services are provided according to standards of care within a framework of outcomes and indicators developed jointly by the NGO community, state refugee coordinators, and U.S. government agencies.

Using R&P funds from PRM, supplemented by cash and in-kind contributions from private and other sources, the participating agencies provide the following services, consistent with the terms of the R&P cooperative agreement:

- Sponsorship;
- Pre-arrival resettlement planning, including placement;
- Reception on arrival;
- Basic needs support (including housing, furnishings, food, and clothing) for at least 30 days;
- Cultural orientation;
- Assistance with access to health, employment, education, and other services as needed; and
- Development and implementation of an initial resettlement plan for each refugee for 30-90 days.

2) Resettlement Services, funded through the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

During and after the initial resettlement period, the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) provides leadership, technical assistance and funding to states, the District of Columbia, and a network of nonprofit organizations to assist refugees to become self sufficient and integrated into U.S. society. These ORR-funded programs use formula and discretionary grants to provide cash and medical assistance, training programs, employment, and other support services to newly-arriving and recently arrived refugees. Those refugees determined ineligible for Supplemental Security Income, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (referred to as Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children, TAFDC, in MA), and

Medicaid can access ORR-funded Refugee Cash and Refugee Medical Assistance for up to eight months after arrival. ORR-funded Refugee Social Services (RSS) are available to refugees for up to five years after arrival. RSS includes employability services such as English language and vocational training to assist refugees to obtain employment and enhance their long-term career opportunities. (Also note, in Massachusetts refugees receive a refugee health assessment through the MA Department of Public Health upon arrival in MA, and minors may be eligible for the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program through the MA Department of Children and Families).

Refugees are eligible for lawful employment upon arrival in the U.S. After one year, a refugee is required to apply for adjustment of status to lawful permanent resident. Five years after admission, a refugee who has been granted lawful permanent resident status is eligible to apply for citizenship.

MA Refugee Resettlement Program, Office for Refugees and Immigrants (ORI)

The federal Office of Refugee Resettlement funds the MA Office for Refugees and Immigrants (ORI) to administer the refugee resettlement program at the state level. ORI is responsible for the administration of all ORR funded benefits and services described above. ORI contracts with the local affiliates of the national refugee resettlement agencies, and other refugee service providers, for the delivery of these services.

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