

Refugee Council USA

Background: United States Resettlement Program (USRP)

A Durable Solution

Millions of refugees around the world are forced to flee their homes due to violence and persecution. Once they cross a border to seek safety, refugees have three options: integrate in the country to which they first fled (or country of asylum), return to their home country, or be resettled to a third country. These options are known as “durable solutions.” Often, refugees cannot stay in the country of asylum or return to their home country. For those refugees, resettlement is key to ending their limbo state. Resettlement is one of three “durable solutions.” Less than one percent of refugees are ever resettled in a third country. However, resettlement is an important tool of refugee protection, both for individual refugees and as a means of encouraging countries of asylum to keep their doors open.

History of USRP

The United States has a long history of welcoming refugees; from Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s, people fleeing from the former Soviet Union, Darfuri refugees fleeing genocide and violence, to Iraqi refugees displaced by the war. Since 1975, the U.S. has resettled approximately 3 million refugees. USRP was formalized with the Refugee Act of 1980 and since then annual admissions have ranged from a high of 207,116 in 1980 to a low of 27,100 in 2002. In fiscal year 2012, the U.S. admitted 58,238 refugees. Each year, the President, in consultation with Congress, determines the number of refugees (known as the Presidential Determination or PD) who may be admitted to the United States from overseas. The PD for fiscal year 2013 is 70,000 refugees.

How does USRP work?

The USRP is a longstanding public-private partnership. The U.S. Department of State (DOS) through the Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) oversees the admission of refugees to the United States after they have been granted refugee status through individual interviews by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials. All refugees undergo security background checks and health screenings. Funding for the identification and processing of refugees, and for initial services, is provided through the Migration and Refugee Account (MRA) account which funds PRM.

Services to refugees in the U.S. are provided by nine non-governmental organizations called “Resettlement Agencies.” These agencies enter into a cooperative agreement with the State Department to provide refugees initial reception and placement services through the Reception and Placement grant. Volags provide services including locating housing, reception at the airport, orientation to the community, facilitation of health screening, follow-up on health issues, enrollment of children in school, enrollment for public services (such as Food Stamps, TANF, Medicare, etc.), and links and/or provides employment, adjustment, and English language programs for refugees.

Additional services to resettled refugees—designed to help them adjust to their new homeland and achieve self-sufficiency—are funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the Department of Health and Human Services. Refugees receive limited cash assistance through different programs that have as a main objective that refugees obtain self-sufficiency in a short period of time, limiting dependency on welfare programs.

What benefits do refugees receive?

The DOS/PRM Reception and Placement grant is \$1850 per refugee. Volags bring private resources as part of the public-private partnership. Refugees are eligible for the same social support programs as U.S. citizens and many receive Food Stamps and Medicare coverage. Volags help refugees to apply for different cash assistance programs: those eligible for TANF are enrolled in this program, refugees ineligible for TANF can receive Refugee Cash Assistance (funded by ORR) for up to 8 months, other refugees are enrolled in the Matching Grant Program, which enables refugees to become self-sufficient within 4 to 6 months without resorting to federal and state welfare programs. There are other programs designed to help refugees to receive ESL classes, healthcare, and social services that are provided by ORR, Volags, and state programs, NGOs, Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs) and community organizations.