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Refugee Resettlement in the United States

BUREAU OF POPULATION, REFUGEES, AND MIGRATION
Fact Sheet
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The United States is proud of its history of welcoming immigrants and refugees. The U.S. refugee resettlement program reflects the United States' highest values and aspirations to compassion, generosity and leadership. Since 1975, Americans have welcomed almost 3 million refugees from all over the world. Refugees have built new lives, homes and communities in towns and cities in all 50 states.

Resettlement: The Solution for Only a Few

A refugee is someone who has fled from his or her home country and cannot return because he or she has a wellfounded fear of persecution based on religion, race, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. The first step for most refugees is to register with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the country to which s/he has fled. UNHCR has the mandate to provide international protection to refugees. UNHCR determines if an individual qualifies as a refugee and, if so, works toward the best possible durable solution for each refugee: safe return to the home country, local integration, or third-country resettlement.

According to UNHCR's latest statistics, there are approximately 10.5 million refugees in the world. The vast majority of these refugees will receive support in the country to which they fled until they can voluntarily and safely return to their home country. A small number of refugees will be allowed to become citizens in the country to which they fled, and an even smaller number — primarily those who are at the highest risk — will be resettled in a third country. While UNHCR reports that less than 1 percent of all refugees are eventually resettled in third countries, the United States welcomes more than half of these refugees, more than all other resettlement countries combined.

U.S. Refugee Admissions Program: Application and Case Processing

When UNHCR — or, rarely, a U.S. Embassy or a specially trained nongovernmental organization — refers a refugee applicant to the United States for resettlement, the case is first received and processed by an Overseas Processing Entity (OPE). The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) works with international and nongovernmental organizations to run eight regional OPEs around the world. Under PRM's guidance, the OPEs process eligible refugee applications for resettlement in the United States.

Some refugees can start the application process with the OPE without a referral from UNHCR or other entity. This includes close relatives of refugees already resettled in the United States and refugees who belong to specific groups set forth in statute or identified by the Department of State as being eligible for direct access to the program.

The OPEs collect biographic and other information from the applicants for security screening. The security screening ensures that terrorists and/or criminals do not enter the United States through the refugee program. Officers from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) review all the information that the OPE has collected and also have a face-to-face interview with each refugee applicant before deciding whether to approve him or her for resettlement in the United States.

When a USCIS officer approves a refugee for admission, the next step is a medical screening to identify medical needs and to ensure that people with a contagious disease, such as tuberculosis, do not enter the United States. Finally, the OPE requests a "sponsorship assurance" from a U.S.-based resettlement agency that is experienced in providing assistance to newly arrived refugees. All refugees are offered a brief U.S. cultural orientation course prior to departure for the United States.

Those refugees who receive USCIS approval to resettle in the United States enter the Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). USRAP is a cooperative public-private program made up of a number of participants. The support of millions of Americans is fundamental to the program's success. Though Congress mandated the program, it is local communities that have ensured the success of the resettlement program by welcoming and helping refugees from around the world.

United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) is comprised of:

- The Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) of the U.S. Department of State.
- The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.
- The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. • Ten domestic nongovernmental organizations with a total of more than 350 affiliated offices across the United States.
- Thousands of private citizens who volunteer their time and skills to help refugees resettle in the United States.

The total processing time varies depending on an applicant's location and other circumstances, but the average time from the initial UNHCR referral to arrival as a refugee in the United States is generally from eight months to one year.

Planning for Refugees' Arrival in the United States

The Department of State works with 10 domestic resettlement agencies that have proven knowledge and resources to resettle refugees. Every week, representatives of each of these 10 agencies meet near Washington to review the biographic information and other case records sent by the OPEs to determine where a refugee will be resettled in the United States. During this meeting, the resettlement agencies match the particular needs of each incoming refugee with the specific resources available. If a refugee has relatives in the United States, he or she is likely to be resettled near or with them. Otherwise, the resettlement agency that agrees to "sponsor" the case decides on the best match between a community's resources and the refugee's needs.

The information about the location and the name of the sponsoring agency is communicated back to the originating OPE, which then works with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to bring the refugee to his or her new home. The cost of refugee transportation is provided as a loan, which refugees are required to begin repaying after they are established in the United States.

Once in the United States

As stated before, the Department of State has cooperative agreements with 10 domestic resettlement agencies to resettle refugees. While some of the agencies have religious affiliations, they are not allowed to proselytize. The standard cooperative agreement between the Department of State and each of the domestic resettlement agencies specifies the goods and services that the agency must provide to each refugee. All together, the 10 domestic resettlement agencies have about 350 affiliates throughout the United States. Each agency headquarters stays in touch with the affiliates to monitor the resources (e.g., interpreters who speak various languages, the size and special features of available housing, the availability of schools with special services, medical care, English classes, counseling, etc.) that each affiliate's community can offer.

As the cooperative agreement requires, all refugees are met at the airport upon arrival in the United States by someone from the sponsoring resettlement affiliate and/or a family member or friend. They are taken to their apartment, which has furnishings, appliances, climateappropriate clothing and some of the food typical of the refugee's culture. Shortly after arrival, refugees are helped to start their lives in the United States. This includes applying for a Social Security card, registering children in school, learning how to reach and use shopping facilities, arranging medical appointments and connecting with needed social or language services.

The Department of State's Reception and Placement program provides assistance for refugees to settle in the United States. It supplies resettlement agencies a one-time sum of \$1,800 per refugee to defray a refugee's costs during the first few weeks. Most of these funds go toward the refugees' rent, furniture, food, and clothing, as well as to pay the costs of agency staff salaries, office space and other resettlement-related expenses that are not donated or provided by volunteers.

Though the Department of State's Reception and Placement program is limited to the first weeks after arrival, the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement works through the states and nongovernmental organizations to provide longerterm cash and medical assistance, as well as language and social services.

Refugees receive work authorization cards and are encouraged to become employed as soon as possible. Based on years of experience, the U.S. refugee resettlement program has found that people learn English and begin to function comfortably much faster if they start work soon after arrival. Most refugees begin in entry-level jobs, even if they have high-level skills or education. With time, many if not most refugees move ahead professionally and find both success and satisfaction in the United States.

After one year, refugees are expected to apply for permanent residence (commonly referred to as a green card) and, after five years in the United States, a refugee is eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship.