

Basic Orientation to Refugees

Who is a refugee?

A refugee is a person who has fled his or her country of origin because of a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. This definition of a "refugee" excludes people who have left their homes only to seek a more prosperous life. Such people are commonly called "economic migrants," and are not refugees. People fleeing civil wars and natural disasters also may not be eligible for refugee resettlement under U.S. law, though they may come under the protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Who determines refugee status?

UNHCR interviews those who believe they are refugees to decide whether they qualify for UNHCR protection and to determine whether the permanent solution in their case is resettlement in a third country such as the United States. If a refugee is referred by UNHCR for resettlement in the U.S. or if a refugee appears to be eligible on other grounds listed, he/she will be interviewed by an officer of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) who will decide whether a person qualifies as a refugee under U.S. law, and thus is eligible for resettlement. UNHCR and INS need to understand the situation clearly in order to make such a decision, so it is especially important that people give them as much detail about why they left their countries. This information is held in the strictest confidence.

The preferred solution for most refugees is to return home as soon as it is safe for them to do so. Only the relatively few who cannot remain in countries of first asylum or who cannot eventually return home will be considered for third country resettlement.

Which refugees are eligible for resettlement in the United States?

Each year, the U.S. resettles a limited number of refugees. Refugees may be eligible for an INS interview for resettlement in the U.S. if:

- UNHCR or the U.S. Embassy refers them to the U.S. for resettlement, or
- they are members of specified ethnic or religious groups in certain countries as determined by the President of the United States. (For some groups, only those with relatives in the U.S. are eligible.)

Generally, refugees must be outside their homelands to be eligible for the U.S. program, though the U.S. processes applications from refugees in their home countries in a few places. (Currently, the U.S. has such programs in Cuba, Vietnam, and the former Soviet Union).

Refugees with criminal records or certain serious health problems may be ineligible to enter the U.S. Ineligibility for the U.S. program does not necessarily preclude eligibility for UNHCR protection or resettlement in other countries.

What if someone is not a member of a "nationality of special humanitarian concern" on the U.S. list?

The U.S. admits a few refugees from other countries each year under special circumstances. For further information overseas, contact UNHCR or the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate.

How can I find out if I am eligible for resettlement in the United States?

If you believe you might be eligible for resettlement in the U.S., make your interest known to UNHCR or the U.S. Embassy or Consulate in your area. If you have close relatives in the United States, they should contact the nearest refugee resettlement agency for advice and help in preparing the necessary forms in support of your application.

How are refugees "processed" for resettlement?

Non-governmental processing agencies carry out most of the preparation casework for INS interviews, in cooperation with U.S. Embassy officials. These agencies interview applicants, help prepare paperwork for INS, and arrange medical examinations and background checks (for security purposes) for those refugees approved by INS.

Following INS approval, the processing agency also asks for the names and addresses of any relatives in the U.S., for details on the person's work history and job skills, and on any special educational or medical needs of the refugee and accompanying family members in order to determine the best resettlement arrangements for the refugee.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) generally arranges transportation to the U.S. on a loan basis. Refugees are expected to repay the cost of their transportation once they are established in the U.S. Refugees or their relatives may, of course, pay their own transportation costs in advance.

What family members may accompany a refugee to the United States if approved?

Generally, only a spouse and unmarried children under the age of 21 may accompany the "principal applicant". Other relatives may qualify for resettlement in the U.S. if they meet U.S. refugee criteria themselves.

Where do refugees live and who helps them resettle?

The United States is a land of great diversity. Refugees may be resettled in small towns or big cities. If a refugee has close relatives already in the U.S., he/she will probably be resettled where the relatives live. If not, a resettlement agency will decide the best placement site based on the availability of jobs, housing, and services. Refugees are expected to go to the site and remain there during their initial resettlement.

The resettlement agency, often called the "sponsor," is the most important source of information and assistance during the first months of adjustment to life in the U.S. An agency representative meets refugees at the airport, arranges for housing, and prepares a

resettlement plan that includes initial contact with governmental services and employment agencies.

What is expected of refugees as new arrivals?

Americans value hard work and initiative. Refugees should get jobs as quickly as possible. Many refugees families, like many American families, find that both husband and wife must work. Lack of English language skills will not prevent refugees from getting jobs, but it may limit the kind of job they can get when they first arrive. Changing jobs is common as English language and job skills improve. Many new arrivals study part-time to improve their English language and job skills while they work. Resettlement agencies can help identify appropriate programs.

Successful resettlement depends on a refugee's ability and willingness to adapt to the new environment. Cooperation with the resettlement agency can be key to a successful transition. Everyone needs to be realistic and optimistic. More than two million refugees have resettled in the U.S. in the past two decades. The vast majority have made the transition to life in the U.S. and have become valued members of American society.

Because the United States is so diverse, generalizing about what to expect is difficult. Remember that every resettled refugee has a different experience. Seek information from a variety of sources.

Resettlement is not a decision to be made lightly. It may mean that a refugee cannot return to his/her home country for years. It may mean permanent separation from friends and relatives. But it may also be the beginning of a new life and new opportunities.

Voluntary Agencies

Nine national voluntary agencies (VOLAGS) have Cooperative Agreements with the Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (DOS/PRM). The VOLAGS work with local Refugee Resettlement Agencies throughout the United States. The resettlement agencies are responsible for providing all essential services during the first 30 days a refugee is in the US. Most agencies continue to advise refugees or make referrals for at least six more months.

Visit the VOLAGs:

- Church World Services
<http://www.churchworldservice.org/Immigration/index.htm>
- Episcopal Migration Ministries
<http://ecusa.anglican.org/emm/emmser.html>
- Ethiopian Community Development Council, Inc.
<http://www.ecdcinternational.org>

- Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
<http://www.hias.org/>
- International Rescue Committee
<http://www.theIRC.org/whatwedo/resettle>
- Immigration and Refugee Services of America **NEW**
<http://www.refugeesusa.org>
- Iowa Bureau of Refugee Services
<http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/Homepages/dhs/refugee/> **NEW**
- Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services
<http://www.lirs.org>
- United States Catholic Conference/Migration and Refugee Services
<http://www.nccbuscc.org/mrs/refprog.htm>
- World Relief
<http://www.wr.org>