

*OVERVIEW OF  
U.S. REFUGEE  
ADMISSION  
PROGRAM*

Source: RCUSA Website

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# History Of The U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program



The U.S. has a long history of providing protection and assistance to persons facing persecution and fleeing violence. In the aftermath of World War II, the U.S. led the assistance and reconstruction effort to help displaced persons. Part of the solution was to resettle to the U.S. hundreds of thousands of Europeans displaced from the war who could not return home. Following the admission of over 250,000 displaced Europeans, the first refugee legislation enacted by the U.S. Congress was the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. This legislation provided for the admission of an additional 400,000 displaced Europeans.

This leadership continued throughout the Cold War period, with the U.S. resettling numerous refugees from Southeast Asia, people fleeing from the former Soviet Union, and Cubans. Later laws provided for admission of persons fleeing Communist regimes including from Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia, Korea, and China. Most of these waves of refugees were assisted by private ethnic and religious organizations in the U.S. which formed the basis for the public/private role of U.S. refugee resettlement today.

In 1975 the U.S. resettled hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian refugees through an ad hoc Refugee Task Force with temporary funding. This experience prompted Congress to pass the Refugee Act of 1980, which incorporated the United Nations definition of “refugee” and standardized the resettlement services for all

refugees admitted to the U.S. The Refugee Act provides the legal basis for today's [U.S. Refugee Admissions Program](#).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the U.S. further expanded its obligations to protect vulnerable and displaced persons by funding programs such as helping victims of gender based violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo, providing educational opportunities to Burmese refugees in Thailand, and helping hundreds of thousands of Sudanese refugees to return to their homes. In recent years, the U.S. has resettled Darfuri refugees fleeing genocide and violence, Bhutanese forced out of their country, Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan refugees displaced by war, and many other populations in need of lifesaving protection.

Each year, the President of the United States, after consulting with Congress and federal agencies, determines the designated nationalities and processing priorities for refugee resettlement for the upcoming year. The President also sets annual ceilings on the total number of refugees who may enter the U.S. from each region of the world. [Learn more about the Presidential Determination Process here](#).

Today, there are nine U.S. refugee resettlement agencies with over 200 local sites and affiliates that help newly arrived refugees settle into local communities. These organizations are Church World Service, Ethiopian Community Development Council, Episcopal Migration Ministries, HIAS, The International Rescue Committee, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services, and World Relief. They all have a Cooperative Agreement with the Department of State to resettle refugees.

Five international or nongovernmental organizations operate Resettlement Support Centers around the world under the supervision and funding of the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) of the U.S. Department of State, and thousands of private citizens volunteer their time and skills to help refugees resettle in the U.S.

Since 1975, the U.S. has resettled over 3 million refugees, with annual admissions figures ranging from a high of 207,000 in 1980 to a low of 27,110 in 2002.

## LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

The current U.S. refugee resettlement program is largely an outgrowth of the [Refugee Act of 1980](#), which amended the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1954 (INA).

## MAJOR ADMINISTRATIVE AGENCIES

The agencies responsible for managing the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program are:

- [Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration \(PRM\), Department of State](#)  
PRM directs U.S. admission policies and coordinates the overseas processing of refugees. PRM is responsible for the transportation and initial reception and integration of refugees. It also administers U.S. funding to UNHCR and other overseas programs that assist refugees.
- [US Citizenship and Immigration Services \(USCIS\), Department of Homeland Security \(DHS\)](#)  
DHS/USCIS field officers are responsible for making individual refugee status determinations abroad. Refugee Officers in the USCIS Refugee Affairs Division focus exclusively on resettlement. Other departments of USCIS are involved in conducting security clearances for refugee processing, adjusting status of refugees to permanent resident, and in naturalization.
- [Office of Refugee Resettlement \(ORR\), Department of Health and Human Services \(HHS\)](#)  
ORR administers federal funding to state and local programs that assist refugees, including cash and medical assistance. It also funds special programs for social services, English language training, and employment services. Individuals granted asylum are also eligible for ORR assistance and services. In addition, ORR oversees programs for unaccompanied minors and foster care for refugees. ORR further funds programs for assisting children in detention and victims of torture and trafficking.