

Why the U.S. Needs a Major Overhaul of its Refugee Program

Background

The goal of the Refugee Act of 1980 was to provide a permanent and systemic procedure for the admission to the U.S. of refugees of special humanitarian concern. The Act also established the Office of Refugee Resettlement within the Department of Health and Human Services to provide comprehensive and uniform provisions for the effective resettlement and absorption of those refugees admitted. The law was drafted in the context of the large scale resettlement of South East Asians, a relatively homogenous group. Almost 30 years later the program now admits individuals and groups from every region of the world and includes torture survivors, unaccompanied minor children, and victims of sexual and gender based violence. Some refugees have lived in camps for decades and others have been deprived of basic human rights, including the freedom of movement. The program designed largely for one group of refugees from a particular historical context is no longer adequate in addressing today's more diverse and complex refugee protection and resettlement situations.

Modernizing the Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Program

Over the past thirty years the U.S. has shifted from working directly with U.S. based organizations to resettle refugees from a couple of geographical regions to working more exclusively with UNHCR in every region of the world. Access to the program, registration, collection of bio-data, medical clearances, and security screening procedures have become more complex and cumbersome, sometimes leading to years of delay, lack of family reunification, or denials to bona fide refugees in need of U.S. protection. Too often there is little coordination and information sharing between overseas actors and domestic resettlement agencies which can lead to a lack of proper planning and poor resettlement outcomes, especially when there are unanticipated mass arrivals of refugees. The overall management of this increasingly complex and multifaceted program needs to be streamlined and modernized so that it more effectively responds to the realities of the 21st century.

Since the admission of refugees is a federal decision and lies outside normal immigration procedures, the federal government has a clear responsibility to assist communities in resettling refugees and helping them to become self-sufficient. Thirty years ago refugees received at minimum a year and a half of transition assistance and were entitled to up to three years of reimbursement for cash and medical payments. This assistance was bolstered by private resettlement agencies and their local affiliates in communities across the U.S. who provided volunteers, in kind donations, and other support services to help ensure a warm welcome and sustainable integration.

Today however refugees receive at most eight months of federal assistance at which point they are expected—regardless of their medical needs or disabilities—to be employed and fully independent. There is no extended or specialized case management for single mothers with pre-school age children, those who are illiterate with no formal education, the elderly, the disabled, or torture survivors. Despite the growing complexity of the program and the diversity of refugees served, funding has remained relatively stagnant.

Reform Needed Now

Increased coordination and communication and a more modern and reflexive management of the admissions program will help ensure that all refugees in need of protection have access to the U.S. program, that the link between overseas and domestic resettlement is restored, and that the U.S. is a stronger leader in 21st century refugee protection. Resettlement can be a life saving tool but only if the U.S. is equipped to respond quickly and effectively to emerging crises. For refugees who have endured for decades in camps, isolated from the world, they too deserve a chance to live again and have their social and political rights restored.

When given a basic foundation from which to rebuild their lives, refugees have proven to be successful entrepreneurs, engines of economic growth, and harvesters of fallow land. They are employed and remain self-sufficient quickly and at comparatively higher rates than other groups. They seek and attain higher education opportunities, form mutual assistance associations, and take on leadership responsibilities. All of this and more is possible when refugees are given basic tools to begin anew.

Changes need to be introduced to modernize the antiquated architecture of the refugee program by ensuring fair access to the program, strong oversight, smooth and even flow of arrivals, rapid response to acute and volatile situations, continuity between pre and post arrival services, family unity, and an elevated and more prominent role for the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Combined, these measures will ensure that all refugees of concern to the U.S. have access to the program and upon arrival receive the basic foundation they need to become self-sufficient and well integrated in the community.