



US Refugee Admissions Program

An overview of built-in security safeguards for refugee resettlement

Here is a step-by-step overview of refugee processing:

Step 1: Determining Refugee Status

UNHCR
Hosting
Governments

A refugee is someone who has fled from his or her home country and cannot return because he or she has a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.

Step 2: Referral to the United States

UNHCR
US Embassy
Trained NGO

A refugee that meets the criteria for resettlement in the United States is referred to the U.S. government. In the case of family reunifications, an Affidavit of Relationship is filed, DNA testing is completed, and the relationship is verified before it can begin processing.

Step 3: Resettlement Support Center (RSC)

RSC
DOS
DHS

An RSC, contracted by the U.S. Department of State, interviews the refugee and compiles personal data and background information for the security clearance process and to present to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) for an in-person interview. RSCs must maintain full compliance with PRM's Guidance on the Treatment of Refugee Records.

Step 4: Security Clearance Process

DOS

The State Department runs the names of all refugees referred to the United States for resettlement through a standard CLASS (Consular Lookout and Support System) name check. This clearance is good for 15 months.

Step 5: Security Clearance Process

DOS
Law Enforcement
Intelligence
Agencies

Certain refugees undergo additional security review called a Security Advisory Opinion (SAO). These cases require a positive SAO clearance from a number of U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies in order to continue the resettlement process. Refugees receive more screening than any other entrants into the United States. The SAO clearance is good for 15 months.

Step 6: In-Person Interview

USCIS
(DHS)

All refugee applicants have an in-person interview by an officer from DHS's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). A trained officer will travel to the country of asylum (or in some cases, origin) to conduct an interview with each refugee applicant being considered for resettlement and determine if the individual qualifies as a refugee and is admissible under U.S. law.

Step 7: Security Clearance Process

DOS
DHS

Refugees who meet the minimum and maximum age requirement have their fingerprints and photograph taken by a trained U.S. government employee, usually on the same day as their DHS interview. The fingerprints are then checked against various U.S. government databases and information on any matches is reviewed by DHS.

Step 8: DHS ApprovalUSCIS
(DHS)

If the USCIS officer finds that the individual qualifies as a refugee and meets other U.S. admission criteria, the officer will conditionally approve the refugee's application for resettlement and submit it to the RSC for final processing. Conditional approvals become final once the results of all security checks have been received and cleared.

Step 9: Medical ScreeningIOM
US Embassy

All refugee applicants approved for resettlement in the U.S. are required to undergo medical screening conducted by the International Organization for Migration or a physician designated by the U.S. Embassy. The required screening processes during resettlement have different validity periods that must be managed by the RSC for the refugee's departure. The shortest is the medical validity which is either three (3) or six (6) months.

Step 10: Match with a Sponsor Agency

RAs

Every refugee is assigned to a Resettlement Agency in the U.S., such as the International Rescue Committee. The IRC then assigns the refugee individual or family to one of their resettlement sites across the US.

Step 11: Cultural Orientation

RSCs

In addition, refugees approved for resettlement are offered cultural orientation while waiting for final processing, to prepare them for their journey to and initial resettlement in the United States.

Step 12: Exit Permits/Recurrent IAC VettingHost Countries
IOM
Intelligence
Agencies

Host Countries generally have their own requirements/checks before a refugee can depart the country for resettlement. IOM facilitates the processing of the required permits. In 2015, recurrent interagency security vetting replaced a final check before departure. Security vetting partners continuously check refugee applicant data. There are additional checks that may be run depending on case changes or other information.

Step 13: Admission to the United StatesCustoms and
Border Protection

Upon arrival at one of the designated ports of entry for refugee admissions, a Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officer will review the refugee documentation and conduct additional screening to ensure that the arriving refugee is the same person who was approved for admission to the United States.

Step 14: Reporting

RAs

Resettlement Agencies are required to report any suspected fraud in any refugee case to both DOS PRM and DHS USCIS and assist the refugee in updating address changes with DHS as required within 10 days of a move.

DHS – Department of Homeland Security
DOS – Department of State
IOM – International Organization for Migration
NGO – Non-governmental Organization

RA – Resettlement Agency
RSC – Resettlement Support Center
UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USCIS – United States Citizenship and Immigration Services