



# Recommendations to rebuild and strengthen the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program

September 2020

Rebuilding the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) and returning America to its historic role as leader in resettlement will take a concerted, long-term effort. A future administration has the unique opportunity to not only rebuild but to usher in needed reforms, which will lay the groundwork for a robust admissions program for years to come.

This document outlines several recommendations to rebuild and strengthen the USRAP by functional area of the program. The areas of priority consideration are:

- Modernize the Reception and Placement Program
- Develop mechanisms for comprehensive and longitudinal data collection
- Expand access to protection through complementary pathways

Please reach out to [JC.Hendrickson@rescue.org](mailto:JC.Hendrickson@rescue.org) for additional information on the recommendations below.

## Referrals

### **Create a roving Resettlement Support Center (RSC)**

A roving RSC would increase the responsiveness and agility of the USRAP to refugee crises when and where they arise as well as provide a professional staff available for secondments to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) for resettlement support.

### **Expand NGO and P-2 referral pathways**

Strengthening diverse referral pathways would increase the number of refugees with access to resettlement and make access more equitable by building capacity across varied refugee-hosting contexts, including in urban areas.

## Processing and placement

### **Drive improvements in processing and security vetting**

Review the current requirements and process with an eye to achieving security while ensuring a dignified, fast, and efficient process for refugees. Security checks should be fair and narrowly tailored to their legitimate purpose. Security vetting partners and USCIS should be held accountable to a fixed timeframe for final decisions on security checks and the adjudication of cases: refugee lives are on hold for years due to the inability to resolve security checks in time and delays often require additional interviews and medical checks. This is inefficient and unfair to applicants.

### **Increase transparency across USRAP stakeholders**

The USRAP operates best when all stakeholders engage in open communication, transparency, and coordination. PRM should increase the sharing of information with stakeholders (Resettlement Agencies, RSCs, state officials, etc.) to the maximum extent practicable and invest in one uniform database across all Resettlement Agencies (RAs).

### **Implement enhanced placement processes**

Incorporate the use of a matching algorithm that includes past placement data to support placement decisions that will optimize integration outcomes for refugees and the communities in which they are resettled. Research by the Stanford Immigration Lab found that economic self-sufficiency could be improved by 40% through the use of [algorithmic assignment](#). Longer-term, more widespread study of this approach would be beneficial.

### **Reinstate placement exceptions**

PRM should remove barriers to integration and community engagement by allowing for greater flexibility in resettling refugees outside of the 50- or 100-mile radius of a resettlement office. Placement decisions should be made based on the best interest of refugees, employment opportunities, and the presence of welcoming communities.

## **Reception and integration**

### **Begin ESL orientation overseas**

Refugees who arrive in the U.S. with basic English skills are better equipped to navigate their new communities.

### **Expand access to protection through complementary pathways**

Invest in innovations to expand opportunities for refugees; engage constituencies for resettlement, such as faith-based organizations, employers, and universities; and increase the durability of the program. Options include a community co-sponsorship program; a scholastic resettlement pilot program; location-based resettlement programs; and employer or labor sector sponsorship programs.

### **Modernize the Reception & Placement (R&P) program**

Evaluate the R&P per capita grant amount on an annual basis and increase it accordingly to account for inflation, cost of living increases, and additional needs caused by unanticipated events such as COVID-19. Allow for flexibility by location to account for cost of living differences.

Increase the duration of R&P case management to a minimum of six months and ideally one year to strengthen integration outcomes. Allow for variability in case management structure such that some newcomers with strong support networks can opt to receive cash in lieu of basic services.

Ensure that, at the beginning of each fiscal year, each RA is able to access 100% of their administrative per capita based on their approved Consolidated Placement Plan (CPP).

Incentivize creativity and innovation by moving from compliance-based reporting to holding resettlement partners accountable for refugee outcomes including employment, self-sufficiency, and educational attainment.

### **Modernize HHS/ORR financing structures**

Conduct a comprehensive review of Refugee Support Service (RSS) funding and update funding amounts according to current needs. These funding structures have not been updated in the past 15 years. More flexible funds would allow for more client-and community-responsive programming.

Make transparent the RSS formula and the actual number of individuals expected to be served each year, including projected arrivals and changes due to secondary migration. These projections, calculated by ORR by state for the coming year, should be shared with resettlement agencies for planning purposes.

As with the R&P program, incentivize creativity and innovation by moving from compliance-based reporting to holding resettlement partners accountable for refugee outcomes including employment, self-sufficiency, and educational attainment.

Promote flexibility and innovation in the delivery of Cash and Medical Assistance payments to refugee populations through the expansion of Replacement Designees and Wilson/Fish as an alternative to state administration. Replacement Designees administered through NGOs increase cost efficiency and reduce the administrative burden for ORR, while allowing for targeted local responses to emerging challenges and unanticipated arrivals. The

Wilson/Fish program supports innovative methods of addressing gaps in the refugee program and increases case management for individuals.

Implement improvements in financing such that resettlement partners have broader flexibility to innovate and to partner with local or other organizations, including with shared private sector financing.

Elevate the status of ORR within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to eliminate barriers to reform and prevent stagnancy.

#### **Cultivate stronger relationships with state and local government officials on refugee resettlement**

Reinstate annual ORR consultations and work with a White House Office of New Americans or a refugee coordinator role to create formal and informal channels for information sharing and relationship building. Provide sufficient funding for investments in state capacity building.

#### **Allow flexibility in achieving integration outcomes**

Recognize that initial resettlement needs and approaches vary by population and location context and allow programs to be designed accordingly. Create opportunities for higher-skilled refugees to become recertified or access extended learning even if at the expense of early employment. Evaluate outcomes rather than initial inputs.

## Research and data

#### **Conduct an in-depth study on the USRAP**

The last study examining the USRAP was commissioned in 2005 by the Department of State and another such study is needed to move the program forward. Such a study should include analysis on both the overseas and domestic aspects of the USRAP and make recommendations regarding how to best help refugees integrate and thrive in the U.S. The study should center refugee voices and investigate how services affect client wellbeing, situation, and experience.

#### **Develop mechanisms for comprehensive and longitudinal data collection**

Impartial, reliable, long-term data is needed on refugee contributions, needs, program outcomes, and secondary migration in order to identify the successes and gaps of the USRAP and inform program changes.

## About the IRC

The International Rescue Committee responds to the world's worst humanitarian crises and helps people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover, and reclaim control of their future. In the U.S., the IRC has a network of [more than 20 resettlement offices](#) that support newly arrived refugees by providing immediate aid, including food, housing and medical attention. Through its [Resettlement Support Center](#) based in Malaysia, the IRC helps refugees prepare applications to the USRAP, facilitates interviews with U.S government officials, and, once refugees are accepted for resettlement, schedules medical screening and provides cultural orientation classes.