The Refugee Processing and Screening System

How refugee cases are processed and screened before refugees are resettled in the United States.

Refugee Resettlement

The United States has long been a global leader in resettling the world's most vulnerable people. Since 1975, the United States has resettled more than 3.2 million refugees fleeing from war and persecution.

In Fiscal Year 2016, the United States welcomed nearly 85,000 refugees. Roughly 72% of these refugees were women and children.

01 Registration and Data Collection

Refugees in need of protection apply for refugee resettlement. Usually, refugees are referred by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), which collects initial documentation and biographical information.

This information is transferred to a Department of State-funded Resettlement Support Center (RSC). The RSC conducts an in-depth interview with the applicant, enters the applicant's documentation into the Department of State's Worldwide Refugee Admission Processing System (WRAPS), cross-references and verifies the data, and sends the information necessary to conduct a background check to other U.S. agencies.

02 Security Checks Begin

U.S. national security agencies, including the National Counterterrorism Center, FBI, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Defense, and the Department of State, as well as the intelligence community, begin screening the applicant using the data transmitted from the RSCs.

The screening checks for security threats, including connections to known bad actors, and past immigration or criminal violations. For Syrian applicants, DHS conducts an additional enhanced review.

Refugees are screened more carefully than any other type of traveler to the U.S.

03 DHS Interview

Security screening results from each agency are transmitted back to DHS and the State Department. Specially trained DHS officers review initial screening results, conduct in-person interviews in the host country, and collect biometric data from the applicants.

The DHS interview confirms the information collected from the previous interviews conducted by the State Department's RSCs. Additional interviews are conducted as new information arises. With each interview, data is verified in person and in WRAPS.

If new information emerges during the interview, the information is entered into WRAPS and additional security checks are conducted. If inconsistencies emerge at any point, the case is put on hold until the inconsistencies are resolved. Once all interviews and checks are complete, DHS adjudicates the case, the decision is entered into WRAPS, and the process continues.

04 Biometric Security Checks

Fingerprints collected by U.S. government employees are stored in a DHS database and screened against:

- The FBI biometric database;
- The DHS biometric database, which includes watch-list information and previous immigration encounters in the U.S. and overseas; and
- The U.S. Department of Defense database, which includes fingerprints obtained around the world.

These fingerprint screening results are reviewed by DHS. Cases with any problematic results are denied. Otherwise, the process continues.

05 Cultural Orientation and Medical Check

Cultural Orientation

Applicants complete a class designed to teach them about American culture, customs and practices.

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Medical Check

All refugees approved by DHS undergo a medical screening to identify diseases of public health significance.

The results of the medical examination are entered into WRAPS. If a case is cleared after the medical check, the process continues.

06 Assignment to Domestic Resettlement Locations and Travel

Every week, representatives from each of the nine domestic resettlement agencies meet and review applicant information transmitted from the RSCs via WRAPS to determine where to resettle each refugee.

Once these placement decisions are made, the placement is recorded in WRAPS, and the refugee is notified of their destination.

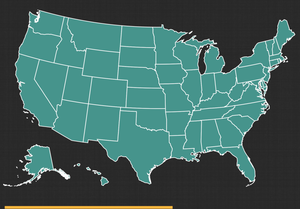
The International Organization for Migration (IOM) books travel for the refugees.

Prior to entry in the U.S., applicants are subject to screening from U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and the Transportation Security Administration's Secure Flight Program.

Applicants with no security concerns continue their travel.

07 ARRIVAL IN THE U.S.

Applicants arrive in the United States, where representatives from nine domestic resettlement agencies welcome refugees at the airport and begin the process of helping them settle in to their new communities.



In Fiscal Year 2016, the U.S. welcomed 84,995 refugees from around the world.

"American leadership is us caring about people who have been forgotten, or who have been discriminated against, or who have been tortured, or who have been subject to unspeakable violence, or have been separated from families at very young ages. That's American leadership. That's when we're the shining light on the hill."

- President Barack Obama, November 21, 2015