



Rebuilding the U.S. Refugee Program for the 21st Century

A New Vision To Create a More Resilient Refugee Program

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Introduction and summary

Once an exemplary model as a welcoming nation to refugees, the U.S. refugee resettlement system has been decimated by the Trump administration since it took office in 2017. Starting with the Muslim ban that January, the administration halted all refugee arrivals for 120 days and banned Syrian refugees indefinitely.¹ It has since systematically targeted key elements of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). Every year, the administration has slashed the annual presidential determination—the numerical ceiling for refugee admissions set by the president in consultation with Congress—reducing it to only 18,000 in fiscal year 2020 and then proposing to admit just 15,000 in fiscal year 2021, the lowest level in the program’s history.² From 2016 to 2020, the number of refugees admitted to the United States dropped by 86 percent.³

According to the Refugee Processing Center, only 11,814 refugees were actually resettled in fiscal year 2020, falling well short of meeting the ceiling set for the year.⁴ The administration was on pace to fall below its fiscal year 2020 refugee admissions target even before the Trump administration halted the program entirely during the coronavirus pandemic. Low admission levels translate to reduced funding available for the operation of the program, starting a domino effect on the entire system—from decimating the local infrastructure, which supports newly arrived refugees, to affecting those overseas who are waiting to be resettled—and making it harder to simply restart once the numbers rise again.

These changes could not have come at a worse possible time. According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are currently 79.5 million people who have been forced to flee their homes globally, with more than 26 million identified as refugees.⁵ In 2019, less than 0.25 percent of the global refugee population was resettled, and around 80 percent of the refugee population was hosted in developing countries, which places a significant responsibility on these nations’ strained systems.⁶ From 2016 to 2019, the number of spaces available worldwide for resettlement declined by 50 percent. In a 2019 analysis, Michael Clemens, economist and senior fellow at the Center for Global Development, estimated that the decrease in spots

available can be directly attributed to the policies of the Trump administration to reduce refugee admissions.⁷ This imbalance of global responsibility-sharing to protect the most vulnerable population of the world may have grave ramifications on regional security and stability, thereby affecting the foreign policy of the United States.

Resettling refugees does not just help refugees; it is also advantageous for the country that takes them in. Examples of refugees making remarkable contributions to their communities in the United States are not hard to find: Refugee families have been attributed to revitalizing cities across the country, from Utica, New York, to Akron, Ohio.⁸ In Buffalo, New York, refugee families have revitalized a section of the city and taken up residence in 500 previously vacant houses. Somalis in Minneapolis have started businesses and contributed to the city's cultural landscape. These communities around the country have benefited from having refugees in their midst. Not taking in these new populations means the United States is denying such communities these benefits.

When the United States is ready to reprioritize refugee resettlement and to restore its reputation as a welcoming nation, it should aim to modernize the program and make it more resilient than ever before, so it can continue to successfully resettle and integrate a diverse refugee population. This report aims to present policymakers and stakeholders with basic principles to reenvision the refugee program and provides policy recommendations at the federal, state, and local levels to help rebuild the system. The goals of this report are threefold: first, to provide ideas to help make the refugee resettlement system more resilient; second, to prepare the system to take in a greater number of refugees; and third, to help the system as a whole better serve the refugee population and receiving communities. To gather and develop these ideas, this research looks back to the period following the 9/11 attacks, when refugee admissions plummeted for several years. During that time, both government and nongovernmental agencies worked together and took key actions that helped the refugee system withstand the slowdown in admissions and eventually return to pre-9/11 levels. While circumstances are very different today, the actions taken by organizations post-9/11 can serve as a guide to what can be done to reconstruct the refugee program in the upcoming years.

This research is informed by in-depth interviews with experts who have worked for decades in the refugee resettlement field and have extensive knowledge of its history as well as its day-to-day operations. This report suggests five main principles to follow when overhauling the resettlement system. First, agencies should think beyond the federal model and include more community groups in the resettlement process.

Second, reforms should be made to stabilize annual refugee flows so that these numbers are independent of changes in administration and thereby allow resettlement agencies to better plan ahead. Third, the program should bring the focus back to the integration of refugees along with achieving economic self-sufficiency. Fourth, agencies should strive to raise awareness about the program to build public support among communities and policymakers. And finally, all stakeholders must be involved in the rebuilding process so that agencies and others affected by the program have a say on how to rebuild it.

The methodology and analysis

The authors conducted interviews with 31 refugee resettlement experts from May through August 2020. The interviewers started with a key set of respondents and used the snowball sampling method to gather the additional interview candidates for the study. The interviewers intentionally chose a set of interviewees with diverse professional backgrounds to provide responses from different viewpoints. For example, the respondents had experience in the U.S. Department of State, the UNHCR, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), national refugee resettlement organizations, local refugee resettlement organizations, and advocacy organizations, as well as state governments. Using this diverse mix of backgrounds, the study was able to triangulate responses to the semistructured questions and identify themes. The authors conducted the interviews and coded the interview transcripts line by line and organized and analyzed the textual data using a qualitative software called QDA Miner. The codes were reviewed to maintain consistency and accuracy among coders.

The report also presents some policy recommendations for the federal government and national and local resettlement organizations.

Some major policy recommendations for the federal government include:

- Modify the funding structure of the program to make sure that local resettlement partners are covered even when the number of refugee arrivals is low.
- Increase funding levels for reception and placement as well as transitional programs that provide additional time-limited support for programs such as employment programs, language assistance, and medical assistance.⁹
- Assign a separate body to monitor and evaluate federal agencies such as the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) that work in resettlement to hold them accountable.

Additionally, policy recommendations for resettlement organizations include:

- Local resettlement organizations should work to diversify their funding streams, services offered, and populations served.
- Local organizations should build new partnerships with local institutions and strengthen their existing networks to raise awareness and increase preparedness.
- National resettlement organizations should ramp up and solidify their advocacy expertise and support their local resettlement partners during the rebuilding phase in a variety of ways.

In 2021, the USRAP is looking at two divergent outcomes. A continued dismantling of the refugee resettlement system is possible. Even if the federal environment makes positive changes unlikely, there are several actions nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) could still take to continue to strengthen themselves and their networks, even under circumstances when there may not be many or any new arrivals. However, if the next administration reprioritizes refugee resettlement, then major changes should be made to the system to modernize and strengthen it. The ideas presented in this report are not only a few ways to better equip the program to face future challenges but also necessary to make the United States a leader in refugee resettlement once again.

Comparing U.S. refugee resettlement in the post-9/11 and Trump administration years

The effects of the 9/11 attacks on U.S. refugee resettlement were largely regarded as a pause rather than a complete shutdown of the system. This ultimately resulted in large-scale changes to the program at the federal level, prompting national and local resettlement agencies to increase their advocacy and make structural adjustments in order to stay afloat. While the resettlement program was able to successfully weather the challenges post-9/11, the Trump administration's deliberate attempts to bar refugees from entering the country and undercut the resettlement infrastructure has presented the greatest existential threat the U.S. refugee program has faced. Both eras significantly affected the infrastructure of the resettlement program. Thus, the lessons learned in restarting resettlement following 9/11, as well as the activities of organizations since the Trump administration took office, can inform the future process of rebuilding.

Post-9/11 shutdown in the resettlement system

Immediately following the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration implemented a three-month moratorium on refugee arrivals, leaving nearly 20,000 refugees already approved to travel to the United States in limbo overseas.¹⁰ Barbara Strack, the former chief of the Refugee Affairs Division at USCIS, noted that one of the main rationales for the moratorium in resettlement was an administration-led effort to institute new security checks for refugees coming to the United States.¹¹ While the system came to a halt between September and December of 2001, many in the resettlement community regarded the policy to be temporary rather than a deliberate attempt to shut down the system. David Martin, Warner-Booker distinguished professor emeritus at the University of Virginia School of Law and former Immigration and Naturalization Service general counsel, explained:

It was pretty clear that those [decreases] were going to be temporary. They lasted longer than people expected, but there was not this general sense, even coming from the Bush administration, that the refugee program is something to get rid of.¹²

Even with confidence that resettlement would return, the moratorium brought immediate challenges for local agencies. For many, the unexpected pause forced a readjustment in planning and operations. For a system whose operations and funding relied almost entirely on predetermined allocations and arrivals, even a temporary pause created yearslong setbacks.

The history of the U.S. refugee resettlement system

As a signatory to the 1967 Protocol to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which expanded refugee protections globally and removed the geographical restrictions and time frames established in the 1951 Refugee Convention following World War II, the United States has a long-standing commitment to the global refugee population. The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”¹³ Approximately 26 million people in the world are currently classified as refugees, not to mention the other 45.7 million internally displaced people, yet the UNHCR estimates only around 108,000 individuals were resettled in 2019.¹⁴

The Refugee Act of 1980 formally established the USRAP and the mechanisms for resettlement, including the annual presidential determination on refugee arrivals, consultations with Congress, and the funding structure for the program.¹⁵ Refugees go through a multilayered process of vetting and screening before coming to the United States. Refugees are typically referred for resettlement to the United States via international partners such as the UNHCR and occasionally by a U.S. embassy.¹⁶ Following a referral, refugees undergo a series of interagency security checks and vetting coordinated by the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), including medical screenings and in-person interviews.¹⁷ It may take several years for refugees to complete this process; just the screening process after referral takes 18 to 24 months, if not longer.¹⁸

The resettlement and integration of refugees in this country is supported by a partnership of public and NGOs. The State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) contracts with nine nongovernmental national resettlement agencies that coordinate travel and sponsor resettled refugees in the United States.¹⁹ They are the Church World Service (CWS); Ethiopian Community Development Council; Episcopal Migration Ministries; HIAS; International Rescue Committee (IRC); U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immi-

grants (USCRI); Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS); U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB); and World Relief Corp. These national agencies are responsible for reviewing refugee files and finding a resettlement location corresponding to the needs of the refugee and the resources available in the area, such as housing and employment, through a network of partner offices. Under the reception and placement program, the director of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS) ORR and the national resettlement organizations resettling the refugee are required to consult with the state and local governments, as well as the local resettlement agency, about the resettlement of refugees in the area. They are further required to pay heed to the recommendations that states and localities provide on where to resettle refugees.²⁰ After refugees are resettled, the local resettlement partners provide direct services, oversee case management, and connect refugees to community resources in order to assist in the resettlement process. Currently, there are approximately 200 resettlement partners operating across the country.²¹

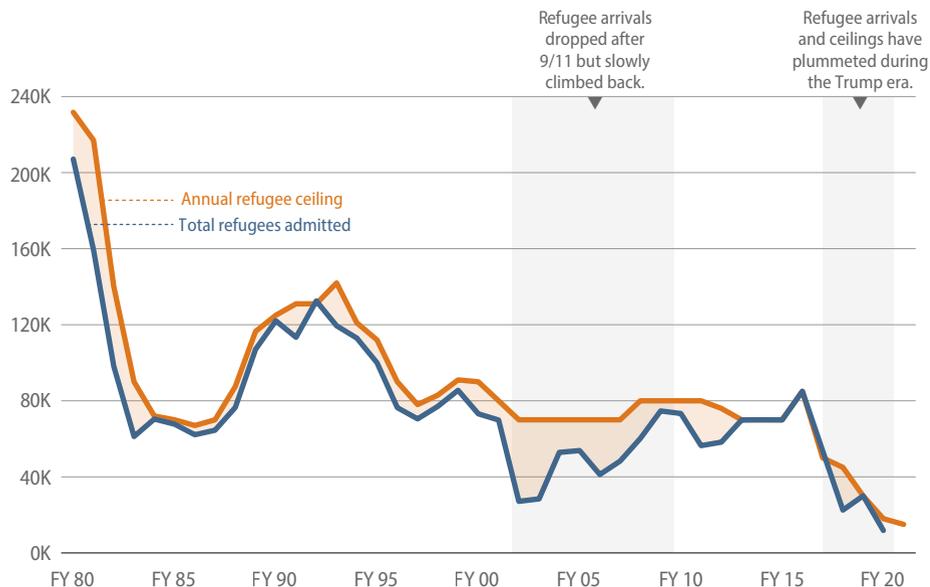
Upon arrival, refugees receive financial assistance from the reception and placement program in the form of a one-time payment—currently \$2,175 per refugee—intended to cover the cost of basic necessities such as food and housing during the first 30 to 90 days as well as the administrative cost that the sponsoring agency incurs during the resettlement process.²² Following reception and placement assistance, a refugee is eligible for services provided by state-sponsored or state-alternative programs funded by Refugee Support Services through the ORR.²³ These services, along with the ORR’s Matching Grant program, are primarily focused on helping refugees and their families find employment opportunities and become economically independent—one of the primary aims of the program.²⁴ Refugee individuals and families also have access to short-term health insurance through the Refugee Medical Assistance program for up to eight months.²⁵ If they qualify, they are eligible to receive federal means-tested benefits such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Medicaid, Children’s Health Insurance Program, as well as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.²⁶

An overhaul at the federal level: Implementing security vetting

The attacks of 9/11 prompted the most extensive reexamination and overhaul that the U.S. refugee resettlement program had experienced since its creation in 1980. The administration-led implementation of interagency security checks was a driving force behind the decision to pause refugee resettlement from September to December 2001. These security measures, still in place today, are conducted primarily across the State Department and DHS, with support from various other intelligence agencies, and include in-person interviews, medical screenings, and biometrics data collection. As a result of security vetting procedures, the entire resettlement process is now estimated to take anywhere from 18 to 24 months.²⁷ Some security checks have an allotted validity period, and thus a delay in one vetting procedure could create a chain of expired clearances, leaving little room for delays without hindering the full timeline for resettlement.

FIGURE 1
The United States saw stark declines in refugee arrivals
in the post-9/11 era and during the Trump presidency

Annual refugee ceilings and total number admitted, fiscal years 1980-2021



* Note: The Trump administration recently proposed a refugee admission ceiling of 15,000.

Sources: Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, "Refugee Admissions Report: Summary of Refugee Admissions as of 30-September-2020" (Washington: U.S. Department of State, 2020), available at https://www.wrapsnet.org/documents/PRM%20Refugee%20Admissions%20Report%20FY2020_09_30.xlsx. For the FY 2020 annual refugee ceiling, see Executive Office of the President, "Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2020," November 1, 2019, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-determination-refugee-admissions-fiscal-year-2020/>. For the FY 2021 proposed annual refugee ceiling, see U.S. Department of State, "Transmission of the President's Report to Congress on the Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2021," Press release, September 30, 2020, available at <https://www.state.gov/transmission-of-the-presidents-report-to-congress-on-the-proposed-refugee-admissions-for-fiscal-year-2021/>.

Political will to rebuild the resettlement system

The commitment from the Bush administration and federal agencies following 9/11 to rebuild resettlement was an essential element in securing needed financial assistance and maintaining the long-standing bipartisan support for the program.

Perhaps the greatest signal of this political will to continue resettlement following 9/11 was the annual presidential determination on refugee arrivals, which sets the ceiling for these numbers. Susan F. Martin, the Donald G. Herzberg professor emerita at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service and the former executive director of the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, noted that the presidential determination creates “a very heightened political profile” for the resettlement program and serves as a “visual exercise of presidential power.”²⁸ The Bush administration maintained a ceiling of 70,000 for refugee arrivals and increased to 80,000 arrivals in its final year in office, a strong indicator of the administration’s desire to rebuild resettlement.²⁹

Simultaneously, the State Department’s PRM worked with the national resettlement agencies to provide budgetary support that allowed the system’s infrastructure to withstand the sudden drop in arrival numbers. Funds were made available for the national resettlement agencies in order to cover administrative costs and maintain resettlement operations at the previous year’s level.³⁰ This form of assistance was particularly important given that the operating assumption of the time was that resettlement would restart in the short term and thus the infrastructure could not be gutted.³¹

Effects of post-9/11 changes on the resettlement system

Even with budgetary support from the State Department as well as a strong commitment to rebuilding from the Bush administration, the U.S. resettlement program took a significant hit in operations and resources following 9/11. Facing the longest shutdown and most precipitous reduction in refugee arrivals since its creation, approximately 58 percent of resettlement agencies were forced to cut some staff, and 25 percent released one-quarter or more of their employees, according to a 2006 survey of resettlement agencies.³² With the nosedive in refugee arrivals, funding was stretched short for providing services or responding to emergencies in the resettled population.

By 2004, the number of refugee arrivals slowly began to increase, and while local resettlement partners were forced to curtail operations, the national resettlement agencies had successfully avoided shuttering their entire networks.³³ This indicated that the U.S. resettlement program retained the infrastructure and was provided a certain level

of support necessary to weather the impact of 9/11 on the program. Similar support must be made available for resettlement agencies in future rebuilding efforts, with the understanding that the system faced an additional layer of targeted attacks from the Trump administration—a factor not existent during the Bush administration.

An existential threat to resettlement under the Trump administration

While refugee arrivals to the United States increased in the decade following the 9/11 attacks, the resettlement program faced another shutdown at the start of the Trump administration. In January 2017, along with halting refugee arrivals, the administration downwardly adjusted the fiscal year 2017 refugee admissions ceiling from 110,000 to a then-historic low of 50,000.³⁴ Unlike the three-month moratorium following 9/11, experts, in interviews with the authors, agreed this was not a temporary measure but the beginning of the dismantling of the program at large. Since then, the administration has done all in its power to disrupt the resettlement infrastructure—proposing to slash the ceiling for refugee arrivals to 15,000 slots in fiscal year 2021; adding layers of bureaucracy by issuing an executive order, currently stayed through a preliminary injunction; allowing states and localities to veto resettlement; and blatantly disregarding the legislative mandate to confer with congressional leaders ahead of issuing a new presidential determination on arrivals.³⁵ Like the post-9/11 era, local agencies have faced major setbacks and closures since the 2017 shutdown and subsequent low arrival numbers, disrupting their ability to provide services for the resettled population and accept new refugees.

The fundamental difference between the resettlement system's decline following 9/11 and the current state of the program is the explicit commitment from the Trump administration to undercut resettlement efforts and block other pathways of entry to this country—posing a threat to the national and local agencies unlike any they have faced.³⁶ Bill Frelick, director of the Refugee and Migrant Rights Division at Human Rights Watch, highlighted the overt animosity at the highest levels of the federal government:

I think the strongest articulation of hostility to refugees is coming from the U.S. president, who is leading a negative charge towards refugee protection worldwide. It's not just that we're not doing as much as we could or even that we're stuck in neutral. This is negative. This is hostile.³⁷

The hostile response to refugee resettlement continues to inhibit any ability for agencies to recuperate and strengthen their infrastructure. Unlike federal agencies in the post-9/11 years, the PRM and other offices have failed to provide supplemental assistance for resettlement agencies struggling to maintain their infrastructure. While resettlement

partners with low numbers of resettled refugees began to consolidate under the Obama administration, the pattern has continued and office closures have increased during the Trump administration.³⁸ In December 2017, the nine national resettlement agencies were informed that offices expected to handle fewer than 100 refugees in fiscal year 2018 would not be reauthorized for participation in the resettlement program.³⁹

Enhanced vetting and slowdowns in resettlement

Additionally, the Trump administration has increased the heavily bureaucratic vetting procedures, established following 9/11, with the effect of slowing the resettlement process and reducing the number of arrivals in order to fall short of the already low ceiling.⁴⁰ As of 2017, DHS began implementing “program enhancements to raise the bar for vetting and screening procedures,” including “increased data collection to more thoroughly investigate applicants, better information sharing between agencies to identify threat actors, and new training procedures to strengthen screener ability to detect fraud and deception.”⁴¹ A new report published by the International Refugee Assistance Project finds that the Trump administration failed to provide justification for the security need of these “program enhancements,” which have disproportionately affected refugees from Muslim-majority countries.⁴²

Since some of these security checks are only valid for a select time frame, a delay in one layer of vetting would likely set off a chain of expired clearances, ultimately hindering a refugee’s ability to travel to the United States. These validity periods of clearances, coupled with the Trump administration’s travel bans and added vetting procedures, have been devastating for refugees waiting in the pipeline. Jen Smyers, director of policy and advocacy at CWS’ Immigration and Refugee Program, gave an example of one of the organization’s local partner’s client, whose wife and newborn son were approved in January 2017 but have still not arrived “because of that domino effect of expired validity.”⁴³

Current state of the resettlement network

Since the attacks on refugee resettlement have been waged from within the administration itself, the process of rebuilding and reinstating higher resettlement numbers in future years will be significantly more challenging than what resettlement agencies faced following 9/11. Local offices have cut staff, and national resettlement agencies have made the tough call to shutter entire local offices, dramatically reducing their capacity

to accept new arrivals and provide services for the resettled population. Since fiscal year 2017, national resettlement agencies have closed or zeroed out the budgets of approximately 134 partner sites across the country—a 38 percent decrease in overall resettlement capacity.⁴⁴ Rachel Pollock, director of resettlement services at the USCCB, noted, “In 2016, our network of affiliate offices resettled over 23,000 refugees, and in 2019, we resettled just over 6,000 refugees.”⁴⁵ Individuals working at the local level also mentioned the challenges of unpredictable and low arrival numbers, particularly when coordinating with local service providers such as health clinics and schools who assist with the integration of refugee families. Infrequent and unpredictable arrivals make it difficult for partner offices to maintain a consistent relationship with these providers and share information on incoming refugee populations.⁴⁶ In order to rebuild and rethink a durable refugee resettlement program, the next administration, along with resettlement agencies, must consider the lessons learned from rebuilding in the post-9/11 era. As a baseline to the principles and recommendations that follow, the next administration must exhibit strong political will to rebuild the resettlement system and begin by raising the presidential determination on refugee arrivals as a signal of this commitment. Second, federal agencies, such as the PRM, should actively work with the national resettlement agencies to provide supplemental funding that would help maintain basic operations and cover administrative costs in order to continue serving resettled populations and preserve the infrastructure necessary for future refugee arrivals. These two measures have proved vital in supporting the U.S. refugee resettlement network through a rebuilding phase.

5 principles for rebuilding the refugee resettlement system

It has been decades since the last major rethinking of the refugee resettlement system in the United States. Many experts interviewed for this report believe that the system needs to be redesigned from the ground up, given the long-standing issues with the program—such as the executive branch having all the power to affect resettlement and the program’s singular focus on getting refugees employed quickly and thereby making refugees economically self-sufficient—that predated even the Trump administration. Such a reimagining would make the program more resilient, expand the program in upcoming years, and provide resettled refugees with sufficient resources to help them succeed.

This research finds that the program needs to adhere to five basic tenets while revamping the system. Some of these ideas reinforce practices already in place, and others call for a radical change in the program.

Think beyond a federal model

One of the challenges of the current refugee resettlement system is that it is centralized and has become increasingly professionalized over the years with less community involvement. The federal government finances major parts of the resettlement process—from refugee selection to their reception and placement. The national resettlement organizations must have contracts with the federal government to work with their local resettlement partners to resettle refugees. While professionalization has brought structure and order to the program, what was lost in this process was the involvement of private individuals in resettling refugees in their communities. As involvement of private individuals decreased, the program lost the direct connection with the local community. Donald Kerwin, the executive director of the Center for Migration Studies, explained:

There weren’t refugees living in people’s homes. There were fewer churches, for example, religious organizations that were actively sponsoring them. Overall, I would say that it was a good development, but there was something lost in terms of really intimate knowledge of refugees and exposure by refugees to long-standing members of the community that existed many years ago.⁴⁷

Even now, the program relies on volunteers but not to the extent or the way it did before. Many experts suggested that some form of a strong community sponsorship program with proper oversight has the potential to expedite integration of refugees, raise public awareness, and help expand the program.⁴⁸ Community co-sponsorship or private sponsorship allows a private individual, congregations, and other community groups to get involved in refugee resettlement and take responsibility for outcomes such as making sure the refugees learn skills to integrate into the community, including develop language skills, or find employment.⁴⁹ The USRAP should explore ways to build this additional avenue for resettlement to complement the current federal model.

There are several models on how to go about establishing this additional pathway for resettlement, with private sponsors taking a combination of different responsibilities.⁵⁰ There are existing models abroad to explore. For example, the Canadian private co-sponsorship model is the oldest program and is also one of the most expansive, giving private sponsors more responsibility with minimal oversight.⁵¹ Another model put forth by the Niskanen Center, a nonprofit that advocates for advancing an open society, involves creating a privately funded resettlement program in combination with a private sponsorship program, which allows nonrefugee residents to apply for their displaced family members.⁵² Currently, refugees in the United States can petition for their immediate family members without waiting for a UNHCR referral.⁵³ The United States also implemented a version of private sponsorship during the 1980s, when, under President Ronald Reagan, the United States resettled 16,000 refugees through private sector funding in addition to the traditional route.⁵⁴ The current refugee program allows for an ad hoc co-sponsorship program in which local groups can partner with the local resettlement organization to help in resettling refugees. Chris George is the executive director of Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services, one of the institutions that has been involving community groups in refugee resettlement for many years in Connecticut. He explained:

*The model involves training them and then placing a refugee family in their community or nearby the community, and we just step back, supervise, and provide oversight. But we step back and let them do virtually all of the services, and it works beautifully.*⁵⁵

Celia Yapita, the chief program officer and director of the Center for Refugee Support at Catholic Charities of Central New Mexico, recalled that the organization had been “exploring other ways to do resettlement that were outside of the federal model” a year or two before 2016, because the support provided by the federal government was just not enough to provide ample help to refugees.⁵⁶ Anticipating the changes in the refugee program after the 2016 election, the organization completely switched

gears: It ended the contract with the federal government and started a co-sponsorship program, where it matched 28 refugee families already present in the community with 28 teams of volunteers who provided structured help. The organization's decision to end the contract reveals the importance of finding additional options for resettling and integrating refugees.

Bring stability to the refugee program to make it more resilient

Refugee resettlement efforts have always adapted to a variety of uncertainties, from shifts in local landscapes to volatilities in refugee situations around the world. The resettlement system in the United States has been generally highly flexible, but the grave impacts of the recent attacks to the system by the Trump administration highlights that it is imperative to introduce stability where possible. While the refugee program once enjoyed strong bipartisan support—even when the issue of immigration more broadly was politically contentious—in recent years, it has become politicized much like the other immigration issues. The Trump administration has used all the tools available to intentionally make the program weaker. The ability to affect the refugee arrival numbers—and then the entire infrastructure—lies solely with the executive branch. It is high time to rethink this process.

There are several ideas that may help stabilize the system to protect it from such challenges in the future. Susan F. Martin, a migration expert with decades of experience in refugee resettlement, suggests that one way is to change the way the admission ceiling is determined.⁵⁷ Martin proposes that the system should return to the concept of “normal flow level,” where the Congress can legislatively set the annual ceiling for refugee admissions based on a past average of refugee arrivals. The president has the flexibility to determine “emergency flow” slots for allocating any number of admission slots to respond to humanitarian crises that may arise and retains the power to increase the ceiling if needed. There is some historical context for this type of policy. When the Refugee Act was first passed in 1980, it provided an annual ceiling of 50,000 for the three subsequent fiscal years and gave the president, in consultation with Congress, the power to request an increase in refugee admissions beyond the ceiling.⁵⁸

A version of this idea was also included in the Guaranteed Refugee Admission Ceiling Enhancement (GRACE) Act, introduced by Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-CA) and by Sen. Edward J. Markey (D-MA) in 2019. This bill would require an annual admission floor of 95,000 in the presidential determination.⁵⁹ Such change would bring some much-needed stability to the program and help refugee resettlement systems to plan.⁶⁰

However, a change that establishes an average congressional floor needs to happen alongside an investment in strengthening broad-based public support for the program. An effort should be made to keep the communities resettling the refugees abreast of these changes so there is more awareness about the program and more preparedness to integrate the refugees.

Another idea that could help in bringing stability to the resettlement program is to add private sponsorship as an avenue for resettling refugees in addition to those being sponsored through resettlement agencies. Sarah Krause, a community sponsorship consultant at Refugee Council USA, states that private sponsorship has the potential to expand U.S. capacity to resettle refugees, allowing refugees to be placed outside traditional resettlement areas in communities that have not previously had the opportunity to participate in refugee welcome and integration.⁶¹ One more reason why private sponsorship could help with protecting the program from unstable political whims is that it gives local groups and communities more stake in the outcomes, which in turn builds more boosters for the program, rather than it being government policy that some members of the community feel is imposed on them.

Prioritize refugee integration along with self-sufficiency

As the United States rebuilds its refugee resettlement system in the coming years, integration of refugees should be one of the top priorities along with achieving self-sufficiency at every agency level. Refugee integration is a two-way process in which refugees adapt to the larger community without losing their cultural identities, and the host community is prepared to welcome them and meet their needs.⁶² Research shows that, over time, refugees resettled in the United States do integrate well into their host community as it relates to socioeconomic indicators such as labor force participation, wages, business ownership, and education, as well as English language acquisition.⁶³

Refugees in the United States have been making commendable strides and contributing to their communities even in the absence of a national integration plan. National resettlement organizations try to jump-start integration by matching refugees with communities that are best suited to help them access services, affordable housing, and job opportunities. However, in the current setup, the programmatic support from the federal government is solely geared toward quickly making refugees economically self-sufficient with only minimal support provided during a limited period. Local resettlement and social service agencies have stepped in to fill the gaps not met by the federal government. These local agencies have become the key actors in helping refugees integrate by recognizing their needs and providing them with necessary services and connections. For example,

the HELLO program at the International Institute of Buffalo, in New York, recognized the need for at-home English classes for refugee mothers unable to leave their homes because of child care issues, and proceeded to deliver it.⁶⁴

Furthermore, it is important to find ways in which local communities can create a welcoming environment to facilitate integration. Paul Stein, a former state refugee coordinator at the Colorado Department of Human Services, emphasized there is not enough focus on making the communities themselves more welcoming in order to integrate refugees, and the priority is welfare avoidance rather than community integration.⁶⁵ An unlikely example of a place adjusting to newcomers and moving forward can be found in the rural community of Lexington, Nebraska. Lexington played a vital role in integrating the Latinx community in the early 1990s, and it continues to work with the local Tyson meat processing plant to integrate a new wave of Somali refugees.⁶⁶ Even if there were some challenges in the beginning, Somali refugees now have developed a sense of belonging in Lexington.

In addition to the local level, the federal government should also find ways to provide resettlement agencies with ideas and tools to help refugees integrate. The PRM and the ORR should make a coordinated effort to collect and analyze data on the resettlement program, including information provided by refugees themselves, in order to work with resettlement agencies to use data to best promote the successful integration of refugees into their new communities. Today, such data are used only to analyze the outcomes of individual agencies, not to improve the impact of the USRAP holistically.⁶⁷ While achieving economic independence is an important goal, all agencies involved should also prioritize improving the integration of refugees, including creating a welcoming environment in the communities to help them integrate.

Raise awareness about the program to build meaningful support among the public and policymakers

Building strong community support for the refugee program and raising awareness among policymakers should be among the goals for both governmental and non-governmental agencies involved in resettlement. After the 9/11 attacks, the pause in resettlement was considered temporary partly because the program enjoyed bipartisan support from the Bush administration as well as from many members of Congress. The negative rhetoric among policymakers and the general public against refugees had been slowly gaining ground in the past two decades. It became starkly visible when the Syrian refugee crisis occurred during the Obama administration. In 2015, after one of the perpetrators in the Paris terrorist attacks falsely identified himself as a Syrian refugee,

more than half the state governments in the United States opposed resettlement of Syrian refugees in their states.⁶⁸ To prevent such a knee-jerk reaction, there should be a concerted effort to inform members of Congress about various emerging refugee situations. Barbara Strack, former chief at USCIS, mentioned that in order to build relationships, her office would regularly hold briefings for members of Congress or their staffs if they were interested and could make time.⁶⁹ Such practices should be strengthened and institutionalized by the State Department to regularly inform policymakers and elected officials about emerging refugee issues.

There is also some evidence that a strong community support system will help to ensure that the program can withstand anti-refugee policies and sentiments. When the Trump administration announced one of the first versions of its Muslim ban, there was massive public outcry against the order, and thousands of supporters showed up at airports to defend incoming foreign nationals affected by the ban.⁷⁰ While the country has witnessed extremely divisive rhetoric from officials and some members of the general public in past years, it has also seen actions of equally passionate defenders for refugees, and immigrants in general. Policymakers and advocates should find creative ways to harness this outpouring of public support and use that to raise more awareness about the program's goals and refugees. In 2012, the State Department partnered with Welcoming America to help refugee agencies "with outreach to communities."⁷¹ Welcoming America, in turn, organized learning circles, conducted webinars, and published toolkits on best practices to welcome refugees. Such partnerships should be revisited with an intentional focus on creating a welcoming environment in communities resettling the refugees, building goodwill, and increasing awareness.

Engage all stakeholders in the rebuilding process

The U.S. refugee program is led by the federal government, but it has operated as a partnership among the federal government, international organizations, and non-governmental agencies since the beginning.⁷² When preparing to ramp up the program, there should be a strong consultation process that involves agencies at all levels from international organizations to local hospitals.⁷³ Giving an example, Bob Carey, former director of the ORR, explained that if the UNHCR has information about a refugee's medical needs, it must be communicated with the local hospital in the area they are going to be resettled. Communication of information like this could happen in one of several ways. The national resettlement agencies already have a structure in place to meet on a weekly basis to decide where refugees should be resettled. They could request additional information on refugees that need special care so that they can be properly matched with

places and services they need. For instance, deaf refugees who need services tailored to them sometimes waste months in a regular program not suited to them.⁷⁴ Had there been better communication about their needs before they were resettled, they could have been placed where they could access much-needed services. Furthermore, it is important that resettlement organizations regularly engage with local institutions that will be involved in serving refugees so there is an understanding about the communities that will provide services to refugees and an open dialogue among organizations to prevent miscommunication.⁷⁵ The current law already requires local agencies and other social service agencies to meet with state and local governments quarterly to consider the capacity to resettle refugees.⁷⁶ The federal government used to be more involved in bringing different agencies together. During the Clinton administration, the USRAP used to hold large conferences every year, bringing together resettlement agencies as well as state and local government agencies.⁷⁷ This was replaced by an annual meeting open to the general public announced in the *Federal Register* during the Bush and Obama administrations. However, none of these events have been organized during the Trump administration. Such events that bring together different actors as well as community members under one roof should be restarted.

Furthermore, it is important to discuss the inefficiencies as well as the successes of the program with former refugees who have been through the system and are acutely aware of its workings.⁷⁸ One way would be to engage with the Refugee Congress, an organization that has refugee delegates across the United States, to identify major faults in the system that need to be fixed while rebuilding the resettlement infrastructure.⁷⁹

Policy recommendations for federal, state, and local agencies to rebuild the USRAP

There is a need to examine each aspect of the refugee resettlement program to find out what was and was not working even before the Trump administration started to dismantle it. The actions taken by different agencies in post-9/11 years to restart the system provide valuable insights into rebuilding. It is evident that local agencies that survived during the Trump administration built on those lessons learned. Fundamental changes must be made to revamp the program, reverse the damage done during the Trump administration, and ensure the infrastructure is strong and resilient to withstand constantly changing domestic and global circumstances.

Recommended changes at the federal level

Since the current program has a top-down approach, major reforms can be brought about with several significant overhauls. This list of recommendations is not exhaustive; it does not include all the policies that need to be reversed to undo the Trump administration's damage. For example, the overseas infrastructure has been obliterated, and relationships with the international organizations and NGOs that do much of the initial work in identifying, referring, preparing, and screening refugees must be restored. The following policy changes should be made at the domestic level to modernize the resettlement and integration system.

Modify the funding structure to ensure stability for local resettlement partners

One of the biggest drawbacks of the current structure is that the funding mechanism works against local resettlement partners and the refugees it is designed to serve. Prior to fiscal year 2001, national refugee resettlement agencies were funded based on a per capita number of refugees who actually arrived, sharing this federal reception and placement funding with local resettlement partners. Starting in fiscal year 2001, the State Department instead provided national management funding to each of the nine refugee resettlement agencies to fund the oversight of their networks, based on negotiated program proposals and planned capacity, not actual arrivals. With this change,

the State Department also started to require that the entire reception and placement grant must now be passed through by the national agencies to their local resettlement partners. Reception and placement funding was still based not on planned arrivals, but on actual refugee arrivals. While these changes by the State Department improved the financial stability of the national agencies, it saddled their local partners with the entire burden of risk in the event that arrivals fell short of the refugee ceiling and refugee placement plans. Lower arrivals than planned translated into a financial windfall for the State Department, which did not have to pay back the reception and placement funding for lower-than-budgeted arrivals, while burdening the local resettlement partners with funding shortfalls to pay for their staff, space, and other administrative outlays needed in anticipation of higher arrivals.⁸⁰

To address this inequity, in years with low arrivals, the State Department sometimes assured resettlement agencies that they would guarantee a certain level of reception and placement funding for local partners, even if the actual number of refugees arrived was below that floor. This practice of “floor funding” began in 2011, a year when refugee arrivals fell far short of targets due to the implementation of new security vetting procedures that caused a severe disruption to refugee arrivals.⁸¹ These funds, however, are based on actual refugee arrivals rather than budgets or expenses. As Mark Hetfield, president and CEO of HIAS, pointed out:

Under the cooperative agreements with the Department of State, it's become impossible to plan for these local agencies because they are told to plan for a given number and then if resettlement numbers fall dramatically below that, due to no fault of their own, they're not funded to pay their bills, to support the staff and the infrastructure that they were required to have to prepare for a certain number of arrivals.⁸²

For this reason, many resettlement partners have not been able to adapt to changing circumstances and have had to let go of their experienced staff or even close their offices. To avoid this situation, after the 9/11 attacks, the national organizations, as well as the resettlement partners, could draw down on some portions of the administrative funds to maintain their infrastructure for around two years.⁸³ Larry Yungk, former senior resettlement officer at the UNHCR, commented that this form of budgetary support was particularly helpful for resettlement agencies to offset costs, such as rent payments on housing for refugee families, that were either lost or doubled given the fluctuations in the system following September 2001.⁸⁴ There was an important change made to the disbursement procedure in 2011, when the PRM began to disburse “a percentage of funding based on the predicted number of refugee arrivals,”

allowing agencies to build budgets that more accurately reflected the resettlement landscape.⁸⁵ This worked as long as there were ample new arrivals. But when refugee arrivals plummeted during the Trump administration, the result was devastating for local resettlement partners, as the planning numbers were too low to sustain viable programs, and actual arrivals were even lower. Even with floor funding under these circumstances, with the floor set so low, resettlement became less and less financially sustainable every year.

To achieve stability going forward, the funding structure should be modified to better support local agencies during downturns. This would help achieve the aim of making the local infrastructure more resilient to the ebbs and flows of refugee resettlement as well as to the changes in the political environment. The federal government should guarantee local resettlement partners administrative funds such as the floor funding received by national organizations to maintain their infrastructure and keep their staff during times of low arrivals.⁸⁶ This would not just provide some stability for the local resettlement partners, but it would also help them to develop new strategies to help their clients, maintain highly skilled staff, and grow their outreach.

Increase the amount of funding and coverage period for the resettlement and integration programs

While the funding structure is an essential part of the program in need of modification, the amount of funding and the period it covers are equally important, if not more so. The funds that the PRM and the ORR provide for initial reception and placement and transitional programs, respectively, have not kept pace with the increases in cost of living and the changing demographics of the refugee population. The resettlement agencies receive a one-time per capita funding for each refugee they resettle to cover expenses for the first three months of resettlement. The local resettlement partners use about half of it to cover the basic needs of refugees, such as housing and food, and use the other half to maintain their infrastructure and staff. The last time the per capita grant was significantly increased was in 2010, rising from \$900 to \$1,800.⁸⁷ Since then, the increase has been quite modest.⁸⁸ Ellen Andrews, the North Carolina area director of CWS, expressed:

*We resettle a lot of single parents from the Democratic Republic of Congo who may have pretty pronounced mental and physical health issues and also often have multiple children who have many of the same issues. And that timeline at three months for them to be on their feet—it's just not really all that realistic.*⁸⁹

As written, the 1980 Refugee Act allows for up to three years of funding to support the refugees once they arrive in the United States.⁹⁰ But reception and placement funding lasts only between one and three months, which is not enough to make substantive strides in becoming economically independent and meeting integration milestones such as learning a new language. Yapita of Catholic Charities of Central New Mexico suggested that even a year of financial support and intensive case management could solve many problems for refugees and would allow them time to integrate.⁹¹ After the three months, the ORR steps in and partners with states to disburse additional funds for programs that help in learning English or finding a job, but service providers agree that is not enough. The decreases in extended federal funding have placed pressure on the states and localities, igniting an increased backlash in those communities.⁹² Program funding needs to be closely examined to allow for flexible use and prolonged support that promotes integration. Such a change in funding structure would also ensure that states and localities are well supported to help refugees resettled in their communities.

Add separate funds for rebuilding

Since the refugee program will have to essentially start from scratch, the federal government should separate funds for institutional rebuilding as well as for local resettlement partners to begin to train and hire staff. According to Susan F. Martin, when the United States decides to increase refugee arrivals, it must provide funding that is not tied to new refugee arrivals in order to cover costs associated with reopening sites closed during the past few years and increasing program capacity at existing sites.⁹³ Similarly, Kevin Appleby, former director of migration and public affairs at the USCCB, suggests that local resettlement partners will also need financial support to rebuild their capacity and to hire and train staff in preparation of taking in larger number of refugees.⁹⁴ The local rebuilding will take time, but as Dawn Calabia, senior adviser emeritus at Refugees International stated, having some “administrative cushion” will help them expand.⁹⁵

Streamline security check process to achieve effectiveness

After 9/11, the refugee program underwent a major overhaul of its security screening procedures. While some experts emphasize that a multilayered security screening renders the program strong and defensible to the public, others argue that it has become too cumbersome, with each administration implementing additional layers of screening. As Hetfield, of HIAS, noted, “More layers and more and more boxes keep being added to the program, and nothing is ever taken away. It has become totally outmoded and ineffective and slow.”⁹⁶ Sunil Varghese, policy director of the International Refugee Assistance Project, suggested there should be deep and careful examination of each step of the screening process that refugees go through to remove or revise procedures that are repetitive and redundant and to add any other step that would help make the process efficient while maintaining its strength.⁹⁷

Most notably, the White House should lead efforts to get the agencies that conduct vetting involved with examining and streamlining the process.

Hold federal agencies accountable

The local resettlement partners are monitored and evaluated periodically by federal government officials to ensure they are adhering to the terms of their contracts. Berta Romero-Fonte, a former federal program monitor on a subcontract with the PRM, visited many local resettlement agencies to determine whether they were complying with the federal cooperative agreements.⁹⁸ Romero-Fonte pointed out that nothing like that existed to monitor the federal agencies, and while the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) sometimes examined the involvement of federal agencies in the refugee program, it was not a regular exercise.

To protect the program against anti-humanitarian actions and to hold the agencies administering the program accountable, an office of an interagency ombudsman headed by a nonpolitical senior appointee should be established to ensure the myriad agencies that are engaged in the resettlement process—the State Department, DHS, HHS, and the various intelligence and security agencies that vet refugees—are functioning with an effective whole-of-government approach. The agencies would be tasked with treating refugees humanely; processing them efficiently and cost effectively; and collecting and analyzing data to prepare resettled refugees for success as new Americans. This ombudsman should have the authority to issue public as well as internal reports to Congress and the executive branch to improve the program.

Recommended changes for the resettlement organizations

Ultimately, resettlement happens at the local level. And without changing some key aspects of how it works and providing a strong support for the local infrastructure, there is little chance that the resettlement system can be more resilient to downturns. After 9/11—and even more so during the Trump administration—resettlement organizations have already been taking major steps to become more resilient and strengthen their network and infrastructure. Now, they need to institutionalize those changes regardless of whether they have support from the administration. The nine national resettlement organizations should continue the support they provide their local resettlement partners and reinforce it.

Diversify funding streams, services offered, and population served

After refugee numbers plummeted following the 9/11 attacks, local refugee resettlement agencies started to diversify their funding streams and activities as they became more aware that it was neither sustainable to be dependent on the federal government alone nor smart to solely focus on resettlement. Some agencies tapped into community resources to make up the gap in funding; for example, Catholic Charities raised resources from their catholic networks.⁹⁹ During the Trump administration, it has been even more evident that diversification is key to the survival of local agencies. Hiram Ruiz, the former director of refugee services for the state of Florida's Department of Children and Families, stated:

The agencies that only did refugee resettlement were the ones that went first. Once resettlement was cut down to almost nothing, they had nothing. They had no other sources of funding for anything, they had to close the doors. The agencies that are still around are the ones that have multiservices.¹⁰⁰

Sheila McGeehan Mastropietro, former director of CWS Lancaster in Pennsylvania, one of the local agencies that is thriving even under these extreme circumstances, noted that after 9/11, the agency also diversified its services.¹⁰¹ CWS Lancaster started to offer employment programs for refugees, language learning services, refugee youth monitoring, and legal immigration services. Since Lancaster was a strong and supportive community, the agency was able to raise approximately \$300,000 annually, which was instrumental during rainy days. Ruiz remarked that by diversifying the services they offered, agencies also had the freedom to tap into other types of funding.¹⁰² Agencies that offered a variety of services, such as employment, counseling, and legal immigration, received funding from other sources and were able to redistribute their resettlement staff to these other types of work and avoid laying them off.

Along with diversifying funding sources and programs offered, after 9/11, the local agencies also went on to serve other population groups, which opened a variety of funding streams for them. Appleby, formerly at the USCCB, mentioned that some local agencies shuttered their offices, but others downscaled and started to serve other groups unaffected by the moratorium placed after 9/11 that halted new refugee arrivals for three months, such as unaccompanied minors and victims of human trafficking.¹⁰³ Besides that, they continued to serve populations who came through the still-operational Cuban-Haitian program. Since President Donald Trump took office, many local agencies have similarly expanded their client base to serve groups such as asylum-seekers, people in detention, unaccompanied minors, undocumented immigrants, homeless youth, and seniors.

CWS Lancaster, for example, used funding from the Vera Institute for Justice in New York to go into ORR shelters in their area and assist unaccompanied minors. They provided legal services such as “Know your rights” presentations and legal screenings.¹⁰⁴ Romero-Fonte, who monitored the resettlement partners, noted that some of them had extended their services to asylum-seekers who required temporary housing and basic necessities when they were bussed from the U.S.-Mexico border area for ongoing travel.¹⁰⁵ George, from Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services, shared that their food pantry used to only serve refugees, but now, 70 percent of its clients are undocumented immigrants.¹⁰⁶

These practices make local agencies highly adaptable to changes, in addition to increasing their access to new funding sources. Yapita, of Catholic Charities of Central New Mexico, said the only operating resettlement agency in Albuquerque is serving groups such as asylum-seekers and migrants at the border, giving it access to another stream of funding from the ORR. She explained that although new refugee arrivals were nonexistent, there were so many previously resettled refugees and asylum-seekers in Albuquerque who needed that help.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, national organizations can also find creative ways to help local resettlement partners diversify their funding sources. Cindy Huang, vice president of strategic outreach at Refugees International, an advocacy organization, mentioned that the organization has been working to understand local landscapes and figure out if there were ways “to pass new programs that would enable funding.”¹⁰⁸ For example, the Phoenix City Council passed a measure to give federal relief funding to refugees to address the consequences of COVID-19 and gaps in programming linked to low federal assistance as a result of low refugee numbers.¹⁰⁹

Going forward, when local agencies rebuild their infrastructure in preparation for higher numbers of refugees, they need to continue to diversify their funding sources by accessing community resources and make fundraising an integral part of their daily operation. Local agencies should carry on these smart strategies, such as diversifying activities and population served, which would allow them to be nimble with their activities and help their staff gain more experience in a variety of roles. National organizations should continue to support local resettlement partners and explore different ways they can access different funding sources to maintain and grow their programs, such as by securing grants to provide other related social, legal, and language interpretation services to refugees, asylum-seekers, and the larger community.

Build and strengthen local partnerships to make them aware of the program

Local resettlement agencies rely on their social service networks to ensure that refugees can easily access services they need. Public school systems, health care systems, and housing are three of the most important relationships that local agencies cultivate to resettle refugees. They also partner with local police departments and local government to make sure these agencies are well prepared to serve a population who has different needs and speaks different languages. For example, in Boise, Idaho, the local police department has a full-time refugee liaison officer who works with the city’s refugee population, the resettlement agencies, and stakeholders to understand and serve the needs of refugees.¹¹⁰

Since new refugees have not consistently arrived in the past few years, many of these relationships must be reestablished and new relationships must be formed. As required by their federal contract, local agencies may already be holding quarterly consultations with these local stakeholders.¹¹¹ But there must be a new push as well as support provided by the federal government to inform, engage, and involve these agencies in the refugee resettlement and integration process so that “they are not caught by surprise and are able to make plans” when refugees arrive, as Angie Plummer, who runs Community Refugee and Immigration Services in Ohio, stated.¹¹² A 2012 GAO report argues that even though quarterly consultations are a requirement, there is no clear guidance on the type of agencies that need to be consulted.¹¹³ In response to the recommendation, the State Department added more guidance on the content of the consultations.¹¹⁴ But the burden of planning and implementing these meetings falls squarely on the local resettlement partners.¹¹⁵

State and local government can play a vital role in serving as a medium, connecting health, school, and other systems with the local resettlement partners regularly. Lavinia Limon, former president and CEO of the USCRI and former director of the ORR under the Clinton administration, stated that the 1980 Refugee Act “envisions the program as a partnership between the federal government, the resettlement agencies, and the states,” but lately, the involvement of states has been very limited.¹¹⁶ Yungk, formerly of the UNHCR, commented that half of the state refugee coordinators may be in part-time positions, and some states may not even have them.¹¹⁷ Having an active state coordinator who has more power to foster better relationships and promote information sharing among agencies could lead to long-lasting partnerships and stronger support for the program. States can also play an important role in convincing governors to support resettlement. If they are too buried in the bureaucracy and have too many other demands on their time, they can’t play an advocacy role within state government in support of resettlement.¹¹⁸

Similarly, local governments in some cities have also been playing a key role in connecting these different systems. For example, when resettlement increases in the coming years, cities that have established an office of immigrant and refugee affairs could be key in developing these important partnerships.¹¹⁹

Ramp up advocacy and public education efforts to build support for the program and refugees

It became apparent during the Trump administration that national resettlement organizations and local agencies must invest more time and effort in advocating and raising public awareness for the program and build goodwill for the refugees. National resettlement organizations are uniquely positioned to strategically build support for the program among policymakers and the general public. One of the reasons the program received backing from the Bush administration and Congress after the 9/11 attacks was because of their collective advocacy efforts during that time. Recently, these organizations have played an outsized role in protecting the program against the Trump administration's anti-refugee actions. Referring to their advocacy work, Smyers, from CWS, relayed that the national organizations were "developing new muscles."¹²⁰ For example, in 2017, HIAS sued the federal government over the first executive order that banned refugee resettlement.¹²¹ In 2019, when the administration issued an executive order that would have granted states and localities the power to veto resettlement in their area, CWS together with HIAS and LIRS sued the government.¹²² Their collaborative advocacy had a positive impact since a federal judge issued a preliminary injunction blocking that executive order.¹²³ These organizations should continue to work together and develop their capacity to strengthen their advocacy expertise and build support for the program among policymakers and key stakeholders.

In addition to raising the profile of the program, the national organizations should be more directly involved in making a case for resettling refugees. Limon, formerly of the USCRI, recalled that years ago, national organizations were much more involved in engaging with the refugees who were overseas and were able to listen to their stories through collective processing entities known as joint voluntary agencies.¹²⁴ At the beginning of the 21st century, the State Department essentially "did away with that process," replacing the joint voluntary agency concept with single-agency overseas processing entities, now known as resettlement support centers (RSCs). No longer collective enterprises representing all resettlement agencies but rather administered by one, RSCs are now tightly controlled by the State Department through a single partner—sometimes an NGO but increasingly, the International Organization for Migration, the U.N. migration agency that processes and moves refugees but has no role in advocacy or in the reception and integration of refugees in the United States. National organizations received a cut-and-dry government form that had a refugee's name and their bio data.

The national resettlement organizations lost that direct initial connection and background they had when they were involved. National resettlement organizations such as HIAS and the IRC already have a strong overseas presence and deliver a variety of services, from legal protection to providing mental health support.¹²⁵ While rebuilding, national resettlement organizations should push for more involvement during the initial phases so that they have the background to advocate for refugees to be resettled. David Martin, the former Immigration and Naturalization Service general counsel, recommended in his 2003 report that the State Department consider suggestions of NGOs, from resettlement organizations to the Refugee Council USA, which is an umbrella organization that brings together the nine resettlement organizations, in order to identify refugee groups who should be prioritized for resettlement to the United States.¹²⁶

Advocacy has always been part of the local resettlement organization's portfolio as well, but since President Trump was elected, many have developed and maintained staff to swiftly respond to sudden and negative policy changes. Many offices added staff to work on advocacy, community organizing, and communication to increase their bandwidth to respond to the threats against the program.¹²⁷

In addition to increasing capacity to do more advocacy, other experts add that local agencies should empower refugees to tell their stories to the larger community and advocate for their community. Smyers, of CWS, mentioned that one of the organization's resettlement partners in Columbus, Ohio, hired a community organizer to do just that.¹²⁸ She stated that some of her activities included refugee leadership development, civic engagement work, advocacy, and community organizing work, such as "bringing together refugees to do training on how to tell your story to an American audience."¹²⁹ Refugees leading advocacy efforts for their communities can be a powerful tool to educate and inform the local officials and a larger community.

Experts also emphasized that the agencies must cast a wider net and reach out to more than just the stakeholders and individuals who have traditionally supported the program.¹³⁰ There are a few ways to raise more public awareness and support for the program. As a result of the Trump administration's executive order giving states and localities power to veto resettlement, CWS had to attend dozens of borough meetings around Pennsylvania to get consent to resettle refugees in their communities.¹³¹ While they were met with a lot of support, they also encountered opposition in some of those meetings. Mastropietro reflected that even though the order should be voided, local resettlement agencies should continue attending those local city and borough meetings as a part of their effort to build goodwill and clear up any misinformation.¹³² The local resettlement partners should go to the communities to let them ask questions about the refugees being resettled.

Additionally, involving community members, through an avenue such as the co-sponsorship program, where community groups resettle refugees, can also help in restoring and strengthening public support.¹³³ It gives community members an opportunity to understand their refugee members better and give them a stake in the program. In a report published by the Migration Policy Institute, Susan Fratzke reported that volunteers and sponsors are uniquely positioned to be sources of information about the refugees and spread it around their community, thus building familiarity and trust.¹³⁴

Rebuild internal capacity in preparation for a higher number of refugees

When the administration decides to rebuild the USRAP and ramp up refugee arrivals in the coming years, local organizations will need to evaluate their capacity of resettling refugees and make a strategic plan to increase their internal capacity with the help and resources provided by their national offices and the federal government. They can look back at key services that they have stopped offering before as a result of budget changes and restart them. For example, Community Refugee and Immigration Services in Ohio would bring back someone who has expertise in cultural orientation.¹³⁵ Currently, because of low refugee numbers, they could not hire a professional full-time staff to run that program like they used to; instead, another staff member, who did not specialize in teaching cultural orientation, was providing that service. Plummer, who leads that organization, added that they have been “muddling through volunteer and interns to fill in the gaps” as much as possible.

Finally, to prepare for increased arrivals in the future, national resettlement agencies should also continue to help their local resettlement partners build their capacity like they have done in the past. For example, they can have professional development trainings for local case managers to further develop their expertise, as well as apply technology and innovation to manage donations, volunteers, and to make compliance with the substantial record keeping requirements of the more efficient so that caseworkers and volunteers can spend more time assisting refugees and less time on paperwork. Stein, the former Colorado state refugee coordinator, explained that case managers often can speak the language but are not well trained to provide social services.¹³⁶

Conclusion

It is not too late to revive the refugee resettlement system in the United States. During the rebuilding process, the overall goals should be to make the program more resilient to changing circumstances with a focus on helping refugees integrate. The recommendations laid out in this report will help the system to take a step toward achieving these goals. Depending on federal landscape in 2021, there may be an opportunity for the United States to restart the refugee resettlement system and see a new wave of refugees arriving in 2021. Changes need to happen at every agency level; while it may take significant time, funds, and effort, it will make the system stronger and improve it in a way that works to the benefit of the refugees and the larger community. At a time when the global refugee population has reached record high levels, it is time for the United States to once again become a model for the world to follow.

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- Dawn Calabia, Senior Adviser Emeritus, Refugees International
- Donald Kerwin, Executive Director, Center for Migration Studies (CMS)
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The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

