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The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and the Catholic Church

What is the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program?

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) was established when Congress passed the bipartisan Refugee Act of 1980. Prior to this, refugees were resettled in the United States on a largely informal and ad hoc basis,¹ and the reception of refugees by American communities was almost entirely coordinated by faith-based groups, including the Catholic Church.

USRAP is the formal process by which people are legally resettled in the United States as refugees. Resettlement through USRAP is distinct from the U.S. asylum process. Any person resettled through USRAP is first screened, vetted, and approved by the U.S. government while outside of the United States. They also receive medical evaluations, a cultural orientation, and other services that maximize their ability to integrate successfully into, and contribute productively to, American communities.

Who is resettled through USRAP?

Only two groups are resettled through USRAP. The first consists of those who qualify for refugee status under U.S. law,² which requires a person to be outside of the United States and: (1) of special humanitarian concern to the United States; (2) have been persecuted, or have a well-founded fear persecution, due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group; (3) not “firmly resettled” in another country; and (4) legally admissible to the United States. The second group resettled through USRAP consists of Iraqi and Afghan nationals approved for a special immigrant visa because they assisted the U.S. missions in Iraq or Afghanistan.³

What is the Catholic Church’s role in USRAP and why?

Given its historical role assisting immigrants and refugees in the United States, the Catholic Church began partnering with the federal government on USRAP when it was created. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops serves as one of ten national resettlement agencies. Through this public-private partnership, resettlement agencies work with local, community-based organizations to receive those approved for resettlement through USRAP, helping them to begin their new lives in the United States.

The Catholic Church’s accompaniment of refugees dates back to the earliest days of Christianity, long preceding the creation of USRAP. In 1948, when the reception of refugees was almost entirely undertaken by faith-based groups, 105 out of 119 Catholic dioceses in the United States at the time had a resettlement director appointed by the local bishop. Today, Catholic ministries across the world provide pastoral and temporal care to vulnerable families, regardless of creed or nationality, in response to Christ’s mandate in Matthew’s Gospel to care for the “least of these” (Mt. 25:31-46).

¹ See U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, *Refugee Timeline*, <https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/our-history/stories-from-the-archives/refugee-timeline> (last updated Jan. 24, 2025).

² See 8 U.S.C. 1157.

³ See ANDORRA BRUNO, CONG. RSCH. SERV., R43725, IRAQI AND AFGHAN SPECIAL IMMIGRANT VISA PROGRAMS, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43725> (last updated Jan. 15, 2025).