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Frontispiece: Newly arrived irregular immigrants waiting outside Yuma for Border Patrol agents to take them to the processing center.

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The Biden-Harris Administration's Makeover of the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program

Nayla Rush

Abstract

The Biden-Harris administration has modernized and expanded the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) to admit increasing numbers of refugees faster and extend the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR)'s benefits and beneficiaries to include non-refugees on U.S. soil. It also increased resettlement efforts for individuals from Latin America to try and discourage illegal border crossers from that region. More importantly, it changed the essence of resettlement – which is basically a life-saving endeavor – by designing the “Welcome Corps” private sponsorship program within USRAP and allowing U.S.-based “private sponsors” who can themselves be earlier refugees or other newcomers to choose their own “refugees” and future American Citizens. Sponsored individuals do not need to actually be refugees according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Refugee Status Determination, let alone that subset of refugees determined by the UN to be in “need of resettlement”. They can simply be friends and family members of those who made it here before them.

Keywords: Welcome Corps, U.S. Immigration, resettlement, parole

Introduction

On World Refugee Day 2024 (June 20), the Biden-Harris administration celebrated the “rebuilding and strengthening” of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) on its watch.¹ Due to its efforts, the administration brought 100,034 refugees into U.S. communities during Fiscal Year 2024, the highest refugee admissions in three decades.²

¹ THE WHITE HOUSE 2024.

² RUSH 2024a.

To get to these numbers, this administration upgraded USRAP's main technology system to ensure "it scales for unprecedented goals in resettling refugees".³ This increased functionality in global case management systems (electronic review of information, digitization of registration forms, expansion of video-teleconference interviews, etc.), has led to faster processing times. Other measures included concurrent processing, adding circuit rides, hiring new staff, opening additional U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) international field offices in the Middle East, and contracting an additional resettlement agency to assist refugees upon arrival.

But beyond admitting increasing numbers of refugees at a faster pace, the Biden-Harris administration has changed the refugee program significantly. It has extended the benefits and beneficiaries of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to include non-refugees on U.S. soil.⁴ What is more, the Biden-Harris administration has changed the essence of resettlement itself, which has always been presented as a "life-saving" endeavor.⁵ By designing the "Welcome Corps" private sponsorship program within the USRAP,⁶ this administration has created opportunities for private individuals in the United States to select their own "refugees" and future American citizens.⁷ By doing so, this administration is not resettling the most vulnerable, but rather privileging those who happen to have friends or family who made it here before them.

The Welcome Corps has also opened the door to non-refugees to be picked for resettlement by private sponsors, though USCIS refugee officers deployed overseas do eventually decide whether they warrant refugee status.⁸ In other words, people can be sponsored for refugee resettlement under the Welcome Corps even if they do not already have refugee status (from, for instance, UNHCR or the government of the country where they are located), including applicants for asylum, "parole", or Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) status. USCIS is left to determine eligibility for refugee status after review of the cases and a one-time interview with the applicant.

In short: You do not need to be a refugee to be sponsored into the United States under the Welcome Corps program, but you can claim persecution and become one to be admitted.

³ UNITED STATES DIGITAL CORPS n.d.

⁴ RUSH 2022.

⁵ UNHCR n.d.(a)

⁶ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE n.d.(a).

⁷ RUSH 2023.

⁸ RUSH 2024b.

In FY 2024 (October 1, 2023, to September 30, 2024), a total of 100,034 refugees were resettled in the United States. This represents 80 percent of President Biden's announced target of 125,000. Of those 100,034 refugees admitted, a record 25,358 (25 percent) came from Latin America and the Caribbean.⁹

The top five countries of origin of resettled refugees in FY 2024 were: Democratic Republic of the Congo (19.9 percent of the total); Afghanistan (14.7 percent); Venezuela (12.9 percent); Syria (11.3 percent); Burma (7.3 percent); and Guatemala (5.0 percent).

The top five placement states in FY 2024 were: Texas (9.8 percent); California (7.6 percent); New York (6.2 percent); Florida (4.6 percent); and Pennsylvania (4.4 percent).

The Modernization and Expansion of the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program under the Biden-Harris Administration

The Biden-Harris administration has modernized and expanded USRAP. Here is how:

Digitizing processes for greater efficiency

The Biden administration partnered with the U.S. Digital Corps to upgrade the main technology system that “supports the United States’ Refugee and Asylum programs to ensure it scales for unprecedented goals in resettling refugees”.¹⁰ The result is an increased functionality in global case management systems (electronic review of information, digitization of registration forms, expansion of video-conference interviews, etc.), leading to faster processing times.

In September 2023, the Department of State, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and U.S. Digital Service (USDS) shifted from paper-based processes to the full implementation of digital ones. These modern case management systems lead to more efficient and cost-effective overseas processing.

Moreover, the Department of State, DHS, the Social Security Administration, and USDS launched a new automated process that streamlines the process for Employment Authorization Documents (EADs) and Social Security cards for

⁹ REFUGEE PROCESSING CENTER n.d.

¹⁰ UNITED STATES DIGITAL CORPS n.d.

refugees.¹¹ The wait time is shortened to approximately 30 days instead of several months.

Expanding domestic resettlement network

Religious or community-based organizations, called resettlement agencies (formerly known as “volags”) have contracts with the Department of State to resettle refugees inside the United States. The Biden administration added a tenth resettlement agency (Bethany Christian Services) to the existing nine.¹² These resettlement agencies maintain nationwide networks of local affiliates to assist with the reception and placement (R&P)¹³ of refugees (and other eligible newcomers¹⁴) and provide them with services and assistance. More than 150 local resettlement offices were opened or reopened, bringing the total of local affiliates to more than 350.

Hiring more than 300 refugee officers

The size of DHS’s refugee officer corps has more than tripled. Over 80,000 refugee applicants overseas were interviewed by refugee officers in the first half of 2024. DHS also partnered with the Department of State to expand the international office footprint of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Two additional USCIS international field offices were opened in Doha, Qatar, and Ankara, Turkey, to support the USRAP’s infrastructure in the region and increase capacity for USCIS refugee processing circuit rides.¹⁵ The opening of the Doha Field Office and the Ankara Field Office brings the total number of USCIS international field offices to 11.

Redesigning overseas processing steps

The Department of State, DHS, and USDS redesigned overseas processing by allowing concurrent steps rather than sequential ones. This new approach, first used for Afghan refugees, was later expanded to other populations. By late 2023, more than half of all refugees interviewed worldwide went through concurrent processing. This remake led to faster processing times (weeks or months instead of historically years-long ones). It also integrated refugee vetting into the National Vetting Center in an effort to simplify “the ways that DHS uses intelligence and

¹¹ U.S. CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES 2024a.

¹² OFFICE OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT 2024a.

¹³ CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICES 2017.

¹⁴ OFFICE OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT 2024b.

¹⁵ RUSH 2024c.

law enforcement information to inform decisions, while maintaining strong privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties protections”.¹⁶

Resolving many of the oldest cases in the program

The Biden- Harris administration has prioritized refugees who have been waiting the longest for a decision on their case. The Department of State, DHS, and USDS created new case-tracking mechanisms to process old cases. More than 32,000 refugees with cases pending for more than five years were resettled in the United States since October 2022.

Launching the Resettlement Diplomacy Network (RDN)

The Biden-Harris administration launched a high-level multilateral forum, the Resettlement Diplomacy Network (RDN), in September 2022 in partnership with Australia, Canada, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the European Commission. Acting as the RDN secretariat, Pathways International and the Migration Policy Institute support the U.S. chairmanship of the RDN.¹⁷

As chair, the U.S. government under the Biden-Harris administration is driving an “ambitious shared agenda around the global expansion and modernization of resettlement programs”.¹⁸

This initiative is one of many that reaffirms the Biden administration’s commitment to the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and “dedication to championing refugee protection and solutions”.¹⁹ Two UN global compacts, the GCR and the “Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration” (GCM) were set in motion following the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants that was adopted by UN member states (including the United States under the Obama administration) in 2016.²⁰ The Trump administration voted “no” on joining the compacts.²¹ Biden has not reversed his predecessor’s decision to stay out of the two UN Global Compacts, but is endorsing the vision contained in them.²²

¹⁶ THE WHITE HOUSE 2024.

¹⁷ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2024.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2023a.

²⁰ UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2016.

²¹ RUSH 2018.

²² U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2021.

Extending ORR's benefits and beneficiaries

This administration extended ORR's benefits: the Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) and Refugee Medical Assistance (RMA) programs were increased from eight to 12 months.²³

ORR's beneficiaries were also extended to include non-refugees on U.S. soil; Afghan and Ukrainian "parolees" were recently added to ORR's list of beneficiaries.²⁴ Humanitarian parole is not a visa, it is a mere official permission to enter and remain temporarily in the United States and does not constitute a formal admission under the U.S. immigration system.²⁵ Newcomer populations other than refugees who are eligible for the same resettlement support services include asylees (individuals granted asylum in the United States), Cubans and Haitians granted entry to the United States, Afghan and Iraqi Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders, victims of human trafficking, certain Afghan humanitarian parolees, and certain Ukrainian humanitarian parolees.²⁶

Expanding access to resettlement

The Biden administration has opened avenues for resettlement for human rights activists and "LGBTQI+" refugees. In 2023, the Department of State designated two senior U.S. government human rights officials to identify these individuals. The administration also increased the ability of U.S. embassies to refer people for refugee resettlement, an option "previously reserved for exceptional circumstances".

The administration has also expanded NGO referrals for refugees.²⁷ The Department of State is partnering with a new consortium of NGOs to identify and refer refugees to USRAP, including "LGBTQI+" persons and certain ethnic and religious minorities.

Also expanding access to USRAP for Afghans

In August 2021, the State Department announced a special refugee designation (Priority 2 (P-2)) for certain Afghans and their eligible family

²³ RUSH 2022.

²⁴ OFFICE OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT 2024b.

²⁵ U.S. CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES n.d.

²⁶ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT 2024.

²⁷ THE WHITE HOUSE 2024.

members (spouses and children of any age, whether married or unmarried).²⁸ It is also allowing U.S. government and military officials to refer Afghans to USRAP. This designation targets Afghans “who may be at risk due to their U.S. affiliation but who are not eligible for a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) because they did not have qualifying employment, or because they have not met the time-in-service requirement to become eligible”.²⁹

Exponentially increasing resettlement efforts for individuals from Latin America

FY 2024’s other big refugee change is that the Biden-Harris administration has significantly increased³⁰ resettlement from Latin America, ostensibly to discourage illegal border crossings from that region; in other words, offering refugee resettlement as an alternative to coming here illegally. The FY 2024 regional allocation from Latin America and the Caribbean (within the total ceiling of 125,000) was increased to 35,000-50,000, up from 15,000 spots in FY 2023. The actual number admitted from Latin America in FY 2024 was 25,358, quadruple the FY 2023 number of 6,312.

The administration also created the Safe Mobility (SMO) initiative in partnership with UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).³¹ SMO is one of many initiatives undertaken by the Biden-Harris administration to expand “lawful pathways” to the United States for refugees and vulnerable migrants in South and Central America.³² This initiative is supposed to reduce unlawful migration and discourage individuals from undertaking dangerous journeys “in search of safety and better opportunities”.³³

Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs) in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Guatemala were opened to facilitate refugees’ and migrants’ access to the United States through refugee resettlement and other means, such as parole, family reunification, and labor opportunities. Since its launch in June 2023, 17,600 refugees have arrived in the United States via the Safe Mobility Initiative.³⁴ By September 12, 2024, “over

²⁸ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2021b.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ BLINKEN 2023.

³¹ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE n.d.(b).

³² MOVILIDAD SEGURA n.d.

³³ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE n.d.(b).

³⁴ Ibid.

245,000 individuals have applied for lawful pathways through the SMOs. Over 40,400 have been approved for refugee status”.³⁵

Since January 2021, UNHCR has referred for resettlement more than twice as many refugees from that region to USRAP as in the previous three decades.³⁶

It introduced “private sponsorships” within USRAP

Beyond admitting increasing numbers of refugees at a faster pace and undertaking all the above measures, the Biden-Harris administration has changed the purpose of refugee program significantly.

It launched the Welcome Corps private sponsorship program within USRAP, “the boldest innovation in refugee resettlement in more than 40 years”.³⁷ The program allows private individuals in the United States (including newly resettled refugees and other newcomers) to select their own “refugees” and future American citizens.³⁸ Those chosen do not even need to be “refugees” (i.e. hold refugee status per UNHCR’s determination), let alone refugees in “need of resettlement” as per UNHCR’s prioritization.

This has changed the essence of resettlement itself, which has always been presented as a “life-saving solution for the most vulnerable refugees in the world.”³⁹ With the “Welcome Corps”, this administration is not resettling those in “need of saving”, but rather favoring those who have friends or family who made it to the United States before them.

The Refugee Resettlement Program

The refugee resettlement program was set up under the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The UN refugee agency, established in 1950 by the General Assembly, has the international mandate to determine who is (and who is not) attributed refugee status (known as Refugee Status Determination, RSD),⁴⁰ to provide refugee assistance, and to decide who is eligible for resettlement in third countries.

³⁵ U.S. CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES 2014.

³⁶ THE WHITE HOUSE 2024.

³⁷ WELCOME CORPS 2024.

³⁸ RUSH 2023.

³⁹ UNHCR USA n.d.(a).

⁴⁰ UNHCR USA n.d.(b).

Resettlement is the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to another country that has agreed to admit them and grant them permanent residence.⁴¹ Per U.S. immigration law, resettled refugees are required to apply for a green card one year after arrival and can apply for citizenship four years later (not five, as the five-year count for refugees starts on the day of arrival).⁴²

UNHCR's ultimate goal is to seek and provide durable solutions that will allow refugees to "rebuild their lives in dignity and peace."⁴³ There are three durable solutions available to refugees:

1. **Voluntary repatriation**, in which refugees return safely to their country of origin;
2. **Local integration**, in which refugees legally, economically, and socially integrate in the host country; and
3. **Resettlement** to a third country in situations where it is "impossible for a person to go back home or remain in the host country."

UNHCR is mandated by its statute and General Assembly Resolutions to undertake resettlement as one of the three durable solutions. Resettlement is meant to be a "critical lifeline for refugees".⁴⁴ UNHCR refers for resettlement in a third country refugees who cannot return home and who "live in perilous situations or have specific needs that cannot be addressed in the country where they have sought protection."⁴⁵

The U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program was created following the 1980 Refugee Act to provide a uniform procedure for refugee admissions and to authorize federal assistance to resettled refugees after arrival in the United States.⁴⁶ The aim was to end an ad hoc approach to refugee admissions that had characterized U.S. refugee policy since World War II.

The annual number of refugees to be admitted every year into the United States, also known as the ceiling – a target that could be unattainable – is set by the U.S. President through a "Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions" after consultation with Congress at the start of each fiscal year. These "consultations", however, are closer to last minute notifications than they are to real deliberations.

⁴¹ UNHCR USA n.d.(c).

⁴² U.S. CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES 2024b.

⁴³ UNHCR USA n.d.(d).

⁴⁴ UNHCR USA 2019.

⁴⁵ UNHCR USA n.d.(c).

⁴⁶ OFFICE OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT 2022.

The United States have traditionally relied on UNHCR for the selection of refugees to be referred for resettlement here. The UNHCR refugee designation and resettlement referral processes are far from perfect, but they fall under an internationally recognized system. While the UNHCR touts resettlement as a “critical lifeline” for some,⁴⁷ it acknowledges that it is not the best option for most refugees; of the 43.4 million refugees under UNHCR’s mandate, it says only 2.4 million are in need of resettlement in 2024.⁴⁸ And out of those 2,4 million, only a small proportion of refugees will end up being resettled, whether in the United States or other countries.

The Biden-Harris administration has rendered the selection process of refugees to be resettled in the United States even more arbitrary. Instead of abiding UNHCR referral guidelines, this administration, with its new Welcome Corps program, chose to trust and empower U.S.-based private individuals (including newcomers) with this proclaimed “life-saving lifeline”.⁴⁹

The Welcome Corps: A Private Sponsorship Program Within USRAP

The Welcome Corps⁵⁰ is a private sponsorship program within USRAP designed by the Biden-Harris administration to create opportunities for private individuals in the United States to select their own “refugees” and future American citizens. The “Welcome Corps” is described as a “transformative service opportunity for Americans inspired to **help refugees** find freedom and security. Through sponsorship, you can be a bridge to safety.”⁵¹ But this “opportunity” is not only available to “Americans”: Sponsors can also be permanent residents – including those with conditional two-year green cards.⁵² A conditional permanent resident receives a green card valid for two years. Conditional green cards cannot be renewed; one must file to remove the conditions on the permanent resident status 90 days before it expires. If the conditions are not removed before the expiry date, one will lose the permanent resident status and become removable from the United States.⁵³ This means that newly resettled refugees – who by U.S. law are

⁴⁷ UNHCR USA 2019.

⁴⁸ UNHCR 2023.

⁴⁹ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2023b.

⁵⁰ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE n.d.(a).

⁵¹ WELCOME CORPS n.d.(a).

⁵² WELCOME CORPS n.d.(b).

⁵³ U.S. CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES 2024c.

required to apply for a green card one year after arrival – and other newcomers can also decide who in turn gets a chance to become American. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, those who get picked under these private sponsorship programs are not necessarily those in need of saving; they could simply be randomly chosen following friends/family ties.

The Welcome Corps program started in January 2023 with phase one, known as the “matching phase”, allowing U.S.-based sponsors to be matched with refugees whose cases were already approved for resettlement under the USRAP.⁵⁴ U.S.-based sponsors could request to be “paired with someone from a particular country or who speaks a certain language”.⁵⁵

The program really got started with the move to phase two, the “naming phase”, on December 29, 2023, under which sponsors can select their own “refugees” and future American citizens,⁵⁶ “a first in the history of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.”⁵⁷

The Welcome Corps program saw limited success during its first, matching phase (with only some 500 sponsors signing up), but picked up under phase two, as sponsors became able to select who they want to bring to the United States. Three months into the naming phase, more than 65,000 individuals in all 50 states plus D.C. had signed up to welcome as refugees people they know or are related to.⁵⁸ By September 2024, the number of sponsors was up to 100,000.⁵⁹

As mentioned above, traditionally, the United States relied on UNHCR for the selection of refugees to be referred for resettlement here. UNHCR does have the international mandate to determine who is (and who is not) attributed refugee status, to provide them assistance, and to decide who among those deemed refugees is eligible for resettlement in a third country. This is no longer the case with the introduction of the Welcome Corps naming phase.

With the Welcome Corps, any individual of any nationality who falls within the program’s eligibility criteria can be referred for resettlement⁶⁰, but to be admitted to the United States, they need to meet the definition of a refugee under U.S. law.

⁵⁴ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2023c.

⁵⁵ X.COM 2024.

⁵⁶ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2023c.

⁵⁷ THE WHITE HOUSE 2024.

⁵⁸ COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP HUB 2024.

⁵⁹ CASEY – CHEA 2024.

⁶⁰ WELCOME CORPS n.d.(c).

USCIS determines eligibility for refugee *status after* review of their cases during a scheduled interview.

When an individual abroad is referred for resettlement in the United States, the case is first received and processed by a Resettlement Support Center (RSC).⁶¹ Here's a brief sequence of the general adjudication process under the Welcome Corps' naming phase:⁶²

- Referral to an RSC by a group of private sponsors of an applicant they know (it used to be the UNHCR who referred people it had registered as refugees for resettlement based on vulnerability and eligibility assessment);
- RSC staff conduct a prescreening interview with the resettlement applicant, initiate biographic checks, enter case in the system, etc.;
- A USCIS refugee officer reviews checks, collects biometrics, conducts eligibility interview with the applicant during a circuit ride (a trip organized to interview numerous refugee applicants abroad);
- USCIS refugee officer (member of the Refugee Corps) adjudicates Form I-590 (Registration for Classification as Refugee), after reviewing admissibility and eligibility for refugee classification;
- RSC processes approved cases for travel, including medical exams and cultural orientation.

The Role of the Refugee Corps

USCIS formed the Refugee Corps within the Refugee, Asylum and International Operations Directorate (RAIO) in 2005 to adjudicate applications for refugee status overseas and determine whether refugee applicants are eligible for resettlement in the United States.⁶³

The Refugee Corps is composed of specially trained officers who spend most of their time in international refugee processing locations interviewing resettlement applicants and adjudicating refugee claims. Refugee officers not only play a key role within USRAP, but their assessment has also a “great impact on the life of the applicant”.⁶⁴

⁶¹ REFUGEE PROCESSING CENTER n.d.

⁶² U.S. CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES 2024d.

⁶³ U.S. CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES 2022.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

No educational requirement is needed to become a refugee officer but one must attend a mandatory paid RAIO Foundations training course. Training (conducted virtually or in-person) can last up to 12 weeks. A residential paid basic immigration officer training program (an approximately six-week course at a USCIS training facility) may also be required.

The refugee officer position requires frequent travel, including circuit rides to international locations that usually last between 45 and 60 days. Some locations “may be physically challenging and may involve working in inhospitable climates, in remote camp settings, or in environments of high security”.⁶⁵ Working conditions may be very demanding, involving “extreme temperatures, harsh working environments, austere living facilities, and long arduous travel”.⁶⁶

The Role of the RSCs

The State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) funds and manages seven RSCs abroad, operated by international and non-governmental organizations.⁶⁷ The role of RSCs in the application and case processing of potential refugees under the USRAP is crucial. Under PRM’s guidance, RSCs collect biographic and other information from the applicants to prepare cases for security screening, interview, and adjudication by DHS’s USCIS. The secretary of Homeland Security has delegated to USCIS the authority to determine eligibility for refugee status under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) – refugee determinations under the INA are “entirely discretionary”.⁶⁸

RSC staff conduct in-depth pre-screening interviews with applicants; assist them in completing their case files, and enter their required documentation into the Department of State’s Worldwide Refugee Admission Processing System (WRAPS); and verify data and send information to other U.S. agencies for background and security checks. They also schedule USCIS refugee eligibility interviews for the applicants.

USCIS refugee officers review all the information that the RSC has collected and the results of security screening processes and conduct an in-person interview

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ REFUGEE PROCESSING CENTER n.d.

⁶⁸ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2023c.

with each refugee applicant before deciding whether to approve him or her for classification as a refugee and deem him or her eligible for resettlement.

During the adjudication interview, the USCIS officer will ask many of the same or similar questions answered in the prescreening interview conducted by RSC staff. Applicants will need to explain again their fear of persecution in their own country. Additional questions may be asked to determine refugee eligibility. Applicants are obligated to be honest and will be asked to swear under oath that everything they say during this interview is true.

RSCs play a central role in the process of vetting potential refugees for security threats – as mentioned, they collect biographic and other information from the applicants to prepare for the adjudication process and security screening:

*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.** [Emphasis added.]⁶⁹*

RSC staff (who are generally citizens of the countries they are stationed in) are entrusted with an important part of the resettlement process. Many work in difficult conditions and are citizens of unsettled countries where corruption is at times deemed an acceptable, even necessary, means of survival. Allegations of fraud, bribery, and corruption taking place within RSCs have been reported in numerous countries.⁷⁰

By UNHCR's own admission, "refugee status and resettlement places are valuable commodities, particularly in countries with acute poverty, where the temptation to make money by whatever means is strong. This makes the resettlement process a target for abuse."⁷¹

RSC staff screening and appraisals can be at best complaisant and at worst open to the highest bidder.

⁶⁹ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2016.

⁷⁰ RUSH 2019.

⁷¹ UNHCR 2008.

Who Can Be Sponsored under the Welcome Corps?

Beneficiaries can be individuals of any nationality provided they meet the definition of a refugee under U.S. law before their application is accepted (USCIS determines eligibility for refugee status). They must also meet the following criteria:⁷²

- They must be 18 years old or, if younger, they need to be referred with a biological parent or legal guardian.
- They must live outside their home country; they must not live in the United States.
- They must live in a country where the U.S. government is able to interview them and process their cases. The Welcome Corps is currently not available for people living in certain countries following a list provided by the Biden-Harris administration.⁷³ This list is subject to revision as country conditions change.
- If a Private Sponsor Group (PSG) is applying to sponsor more than one person, all must be living in the same country and plan to live in the same household once they get to the United States.
- To be admitted into the United States, applicants must pass the U.S. government's refugee screening and vetting process. Those previously denied for resettlement to the United States through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program cannot be sponsored under the Welcome Corps.
- If individuals have an existing case number with USRAP or the Afghan SIV program, they can be sponsored regardless of their current location.
- Every refugee listed on an application needs proof of registration or a refugee identification card to be eligible for this program (registration exemptions exist).
- Refugees of Cuban, Haitian, Nicaraguan, or Venezuelan nationality can upload a Form I-134 or I-134A (Online Request to be a Supporter and Declaration of Financial Report) already filed on their behalf by September 30, 2023, instead of proof of registration. They must have been outside their country of nationality by the time the form was filed.

To be able to be sponsored under the Welcome Corps, individuals must have one of the following registration documents (even though individuals with none of the below registration documents can still be considered for resettlement.

⁷² WELCOME CORPS n.d.(c).

⁷³ Ibid.

Registrations exemptions are allowed “on an extremely limited basis after a case-specific review”:⁷⁴

- A refugee or asylum seeker registration confirmation with UNHCR or the government where they currently live;
- A *Movilidad Segura* (Safe Mobility Initiative) Registration for individuals in Latin America; or
- A pending Form I-134 or I-134A (Online Request to be a Supporter and Declaration of Financial Report) for individuals of Cuban, Haitian, Nicaraguan, or Venezuelan nationality already filed on their behalf under the “Processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (CHNV)”.⁷⁵

This last one is notable. CHNV is another program designed by the Biden-Harris administration to facilitate “lawful” access to the United States in order to deter illegal entries.⁷⁶ The program allows Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans and their family members (of any nationality) to be released into the United States on parole (for an initial period of two years) and apply for employment authorization, provided U.S.-based supporters agree to sponsor them during their initial stay here (90 days).

Under CHNV, foreign nationals (of any nationality) who have “temporary authorization” to remain in the United States – such as on parole – can sponsor *other* foreign nationals in turn to come here on parole. Under this program, U.S.-based sponsors do not need to be U.S. citizens or permanent residents (i.e. green card holders) or even have a formal legal immigration status. Foreign nationals who are on U.S. ground under parole,⁷⁷ Temporary Protected Status (TPS)⁷⁸ (including those granted an initial TPS and have re-registered for TPS but are waiting the final approval as well as those who have TPS and are in removal proceedings),⁷⁹ Deferred Enforced Departure (DED),⁸⁰ or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)⁸¹ can act as private CHNV sponsors and select who gets to follow them to the United States.

⁷⁴ WELCOME CORPS n.d.(d).

⁷⁵ U.S. CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES 2024e.

⁷⁶ RUSH 2024d.

⁷⁷ U.S. CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES n.d.

⁷⁸ MOSLIMANI 2024.

⁷⁹ U.S. CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES 2024f.

⁸⁰ U.S. CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES 2024g.

⁸¹ USA GOV 2024.

What that means is that, while their final sponsor would still have to be a citizen or permanent resident, refugees resettled in the United States under the Welcome Corps could have initially been selected (and thus have a Form I-134 or I-134A) by inadmissible aliens who are in the United States under some protection from deportation.

Conclusion

The Biden-Harris administration has changed the way the refugee resettlement program works, turning it into something more like an ordinary immigration program, rather than a life-saving humanitarian vehicle for a handful of the world's most persecuted people.

This administration opened the door to non-refugees to be picked for resettlement by private sponsors. Asylum seekers, "parole" applicants or SIVs who meet certain criteria can now have access to their own resettlement spots if chosen by friends and family members who preceded them here.

True, USCIS refugee officers are the ones who, in the end and during a one-time interview, decide whether applicants are eligible for refugee status and resettlement, but this can be a formality. A Syrian in Lebanon, for instance, who is sponsored by a Syrian green card holder in the United States (possibly himself a recent refugee) is not likely to be denied refugee status by the USCIS officer if the Syrian claims persecution and fear of return to Syria.

What's more, individuals entrusted with the initial selection of our future resettled refugees do not even need to be American citizens or green card holders; they can very well be foreign nationals who have "temporary authorization" to remain in the United States.

So, if we are now welcoming non-refugees as "refugees" and we're allowing newcomers to pick their own future Americans, who exactly are we "saving?" And, who by the same token, are we leaving behind?

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