

Executive Summary

A Roadmap to Rebuilding the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program

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The Path To 125k Refugee Admissions

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) is at a crossroads. Under the Trump Administration, years of assault on the program have slashed admissions to historic lows, effectively eviscerating a bipartisan tradition of extending a lifeline to the world's most vulnerable people. If a new president is sworn into office in January 2021, he will likely arrive with a mandate to significantly increase refugee admissions levels. This is commendable, but past experience shows that achieving higher admissions levels requires more than just setting a higher target. Any administration that seeks to significantly increase refugee admissions levels will need to be ready on Day 1 to begin not only rebuilding but significantly strengthening the program – designing a process that is more efficient, innovative, and humane for refugees and the communities across America welcoming them.

For a potential new administration taking office several months into Fiscal Year 2021 (FY21), this report finds that early and decisive actions to rebuild USRAP's core infrastructure would make it possible to meet the goal of increasing admissions from current historic lows to admit at least 50,000 refugees by the end of FY21, although a new administration should rightly set a higher target as a signal of political priority and commitment. This estimate assumes that resources necessary to scale admissions are conveyed in a new administration's conversations with Congressional leadership on budget priorities. **In Fiscal Year 2022 (FY22), this report determines that it will be challenging, but attainable, to meet a goal of admitting at least 125,000 refugees by investing in innovations that produce significant operational efficiencies.** Achieving this goal in FY22 and exceeding it in future years is only possible if the FY21 priority for all agencies involved in USRAP is building key medium-term infrastructure while restarting the pipeline. If agencies push for as high a FY21 number as possible at the expense of system-wide improvements, they will be unable to take key steps towards strengthening the program and sustainably enabling higher numbers in the future. These priority steps include:

Issuing an Executive Order on Refugee Admissions and Protection on Day 1, including:

- Revising the admissions target established in the Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for FY21;
- Rescinding Trump Administration policies that have undermined USRAP and wider U.S. refugee protection policy;
- Designating and empowering the appropriate senior-level White House National Security Council official responsible for driving interagency coordination;
- Re-establishing regional allocations for refugee admissions;
- Rebuilding referral pathways with UNHCR;
- Designating all nationalities for Priority 3 eligibility.

Selecting individuals committed to effectively leading and empowering the professional staff of USRAP for key political roles, including at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement, and directing the leadership of the vetting agencies, including the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and other members of the Intelligence Community, to ensure that efficient and fair vetting is understood as part of their core missions.

Directing an interagency effort to jumpstart the processing of refugees currently in the pipeline, including:

- Strengthening the National Vetting Governance Board and leveraging it to immediately begin tracking of security check status and prioritizing backlogs across agencies;
- Deploying a U.S. Digital Service team to support the rebuilding of USRAP;
- Focusing interagency coordination on prioritizing the re-approvals of refugees who were previously interviewed;
- Coordinating with domestic resettlement agencies to enable them to scale-up their operations for new refugee arrivals.

Driving major operational improvements to interviewing and vetting processes, including:

- Convening a 60-day review of refugee security vetting led by the National Security Council to develop options to formalize interagency governance, consolidate vetting processes and technology on a modern system such as that of the National Vetting Center, and adjust methods and thresholds to best adapt to the changing threat environment by the start of FY22;
- Scaling up the capacity of the Resettlement Support Centers and USCIS Refugee Corps;
- Expanding the use of virtual interviews for less complex cases;
- Utilizing data to increase the customization of USCIS interviews based on the complexity of each case.

Reviewing and adjusting USRAP operations to support the resumption of refugee admissions at scale in line with the best public health practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, including:

- Supporting populations impacted by Trump Administration's suspension of USRAP (e.g., prioritizing the re-approval of expired security and medical checks for refugees whose admission was held up during the COVID-19 linked suspension of USRAP);
- Revising USCIS procedures to support a greater use of virtual interviews for follow-up interviews and hard-to-reach populations while planning ahead for the resumption of circuit rides when they can be resumed safely;
- Adjusting Resettlement Support Center operations to identify work that can be done remotely while maintaining the security of refugees' personal information;
- Ensuring pre-arrival health screenings continue to incorporate COVID-19 testing;
- Implementing a system of testing, tracing, and isolation for newly arrived refugees;

- Adjusting resettlement operations, including providing support to resettled refugees who have been heavily impacted by the pandemic economically, incorporating digital literacy as part of cultural orientation programs offered to newly arrived refugees, and ensuring continued funding for one-time connectivity costs for access to telehealth and school.

Rebuilding and growing multiple referral pathways into the USRAP pipeline, including:

- Strengthening UNHCR's overseas infrastructure for sourcing new referrals into the USRAP pipeline. In order for the U.S. to meet a high admissions target in FY22, UNHCR will need to refer at significantly higher than historical rates starting as early as the first half of FY21;
- Directing the State Department to issue a cable reminding posts of their authority to make Priority 1 referrals;
- Identifying groups of special humanitarian concern for Priority 2 eligibility.

Expanding processing for refugees from the Western Hemisphere, including:

- Reinstating the Central American Minors program with clear objectives;
- Working with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to expand referral operations in Central America and Mexico.

USRAP has been so thoroughly weakened that incremental changes to ramp up admissions in the near-term will not be enough to ensure its long-term health and durability. Considerable innovation is required to reimagine the domestic resettlement system as a world-class model of successful refugee integration, including reorienting resettlement around long-term social and economic outcomes and launching a national private sponsorship program to expand community involvement. This work should be grounded in a durable base of bipartisan support that strengthens the program's resilience through new partnerships and effective communications at the local, state, and national level.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents both additional complexity to the challenge and urgency to the need. It is difficult to anticipate fully the worsening humanitarian circumstances that refugee populations will face in the coming years or the foreign policy priorities around refugee resettlement, so the implementation of these recommendations must remain flexible and resilient.