

Refugees in Idaho November 2016, Vol. 7, No. 6

Background

Idaho has been formally involved with refugee resettlement since 1975.^a At that time, Governor John Evans joined many other governors in establishing a resettlement program to support Indochinese refugees fleeing unstable states in Southeast Asia.^a Since then, Idaho's resettlement efforts have grown and now involve multiple partnerships to support the well-being of refugees. This report provides key information about Idaho's refugees and the screening process to which they are subject.

Report highlights

- ◆ Refugees are a subset of immigrants. Throughout the refugee resettlement process, security is the number one priority.^c Refugees are subject to much more rigorous, lengthy security checks and screenings than tourists, workers with temporary work visas, and students seeking to study in the U.S.^{a,b,e,f}
- ◆ In the past five years, Idaho has resettled refugees from many countries including Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Bhutan, Burma, and Congo. They bring a mixture of religions, languages, and cultures.^a
- ◆ Refugee programs and services are funded by federal dollars. In 2015, Idaho received approximately \$10 million to support refugees through grants, cash assistance, and related programs.^{a,h} Idaho does not appropriate general fund dollars specifically to support refugees.
- ◆ While refugees may be eligible for federally funded public assistance programs administered by the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, they make up only a tiny percentage of total covered clients.^a

How refugee status is defined

Refugees are a specific subset of immigrants. They are typically given refugee status by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) before applying for refugee status with the United States, and potentially entering the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.

According to the UNHCR, a refugee is a person who, "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his [or her] nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him [or her]self of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his [or her] former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it."^d

How are refugees resettled in Idaho?

Refugees resettle in Idaho and other states through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP).^j This program processes and screens refugees to determine their eligibility for resettlement in this country. The process can take up to three years.^{h,j} It begins with refugees around the world applying for refugee support through the United Nations, often while living in refugee camps.^{a,c,e,f}

To begin the process, refugees must be referred to the U.S. government. This occurs mainly through the UNHCR, an international body responsible for confirming applicants' need for resettlement after they are determined to be refugees.^j Some refugees may also apply directly to the USRAP if they meet criteria for certain direct application programs.^j Refugees may also be referred by immediate family members seeking to be reunited.^h

Those who pass through the primary criteria (including initial background checks, refugee status confirmation, and demonstration of resettlement need) are referred to a federally funded Resettlement Support Center (RSC). These internationally based centers are contracted by the U.S. Department of State to process and support U.S. refugee cases. These centers compile data and prepare applicant files for additional biographic security checks.^{a,h}

After preliminary prescreening by the RSC, refugee interviews are conducted by specially trained officers of the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to determine eligibility for resettlement in the U.S.^{e,c} Interviews may take place at an RSC office, U.S. embassy, or another available office.^{i,j}

Refugees whose applications move forward are assigned to one of the nine U.S. Resettlement Agencies, which then connect refugees with one of the nation's numerous local offices. Idaho has four local resettlement offices—three in Boise and one in Twin Falls.^{c,e,f}

Security and screening of refugees

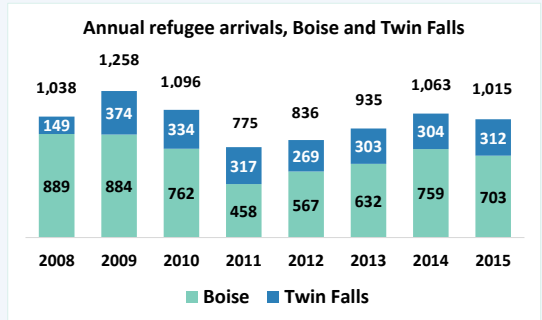
Throughout the resettlement process, security is the number one priority. Refugees are subject to more rigorous security checks and screenings than any other group entering the United States.^{e,g}

- ◆ Before entering the U.S. through the Refugee Admissions Program, refugees are subject to the collection of biodata and biometric scans by the UNHCR to confirm identity and provide accurate identification documents.^{c,e}
- ◆ If refugees are approved for the U.S. program, they are subject to additional security checks and screenings by multiple U.S. agencies, including the FBI, Department of Homeland Security, State Department, National Counterterrorism Center/Intelligence Community, and more.^{c,e}
- ◆ Additionally, biometric checks, including fingerprints, are collected by the Department of Homeland Security and screened by the Department of Defense.^e
- ◆ All of the information and data collected are vetted by government security agencies and placed through security and intelligence databases to check for suspicious or criminal activity, as well as to assist in confirming identification.^b
- ◆ The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention requires medical screenings of all applicants. Screenings are conducted in medical facilities near RSCs by the International Organization for Migration before refugees enter the United States. In addition, all refugees entering the U.S. receive a health screening shortly after arrival.^{c,e,f,g}

If security concerns arise at any time, applications can be delayed, rejected, or subject to additional security checks.^b Additional information regarding the refugee resettlement process (including security aspects) is available at www.whitehouse.gov and www.idahorefugees.org/resettlement.

How many refugees come to Idaho?

The number of refugees resettling in Idaho and other states is determined through communication with international partners by multiple U.S. departments including State, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services.^a These departments submit an Annual Report to Congress with proposed admissions numbers. Following consultations with Congress, the President must sign a determination each year that establishes overall admission levels and regional allocations.^{a,b,j} Idaho has received an average of 1,000 refugees annually since 2008, with roughly 70% resettling in Boise and the rest in Twin Falls.^a In 2015, 70% of refugee arrivals in Idaho were women and children.^h The 2016 Annual Report to Congress recommends that the United States resettle 85,000 refugees.^b Just over 1%—or 1,182—will be resettled in Idaho.^h



SOURCE: Idaho Office for Refugees

Where do Idaho's refugees come from?

Refugees resettling in Idaho come from many countries with a mixture of religions, languages, and cultures.^{a,b,g} The number of refugees of a particular race or nationality depends on the allocation proposed in the Annual Report to Congress. The countries of origin change over time, depending on wars and other events that threaten the security of individuals and families. In 2015, more than half of the roughly 1,000 refugees resettling in Idaho came from African countries (53%), followed by the Near East and South Asia (26%), Europe and Central Asia (10%), East Asia (9%), and Latin America and the Caribbean (2%).^a

What kind of support do refugees receive?

Refugees resettling in Idaho receive support through federally allocated funds for their initial resettlement.^{a,b,g} These initial 30-90 days are supported by Reception and Replacement Programs funded by the U.S. Department of State (DOS). In addition, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services allocates funds each year to help refugees integrate into U.S. society.^b ORR provides grants for cash and medical assistance, employment and training programs, and case management services.^{a,b} Through ORR support, Idaho is able to fund English training programs, refugee medical assistance, employment services, and other essential services in Boise and Twin Falls. In 2015, federal funds from the DOS and ORR provided over \$10 million to Idaho public agencies and nonprofit organizations to support refugee resettlement and integration.^{a,j} In 2016, the federal government will spend an estimated \$1.19 billion to support refugee processing, admissions, and resettlement nationwide.^b

Alongside initial support, refugees may also be eligible for additional assistance if they meet certain criteria. For example, Idaho Department of Health and Welfare's federally funded Self Reliance Programs—such as Idaho Child Care Program, Temporary Assistance for Families in Idaho, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program — are federally funded and help support Idaho families in need.^a In 2015, refugees accounted for less than 2.5% of the total clientele of any of these programs.^a Idaho does not allocate general fund dollars to specifically support refugees.

<i>Program participation, SFY 2015</i>			
Program	Total covered clients	Refugee covered clients	
	Number	Number	Percent of total
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program	290,200	4,635	1.6
Medicaid	347,900	4,048	1.2
Aid to the Aged, Blind, and Disabled	19,100	430	2.3
Idaho Child Care Program	16,461	214	1.3
Temporary Assistance for Families in Idaho	5,000	46	0.9
Advanced Premium Tax Credit	77,200	1,097	1.4

SOURCE: Idaho Department of Health and Welfare

How do refugees contribute to Idaho?

After refugees arrive in the U.S., the federal government considers them to be future U.S. citizens. They receive temporary assistance to help ensure they adapt and integrate into their new communities and contribute as if they were native born. After arriving, they rebuild their lives and once again pursue employment and education.

Refugees come to Idaho with different education levels and experiences.^{a,g} They work in a variety of industries, including manufacturing, healthcare, retail, and dairy. Refugees who come with professional backgrounds work in high demand fields such as information technology, engineering, and medicine. In 2015, 65%—or 323—of Idaho’s employed refugees worked full-time and 35%—or 171—worked part-time.^a Refugees pay taxes and many buy homes. They also create new businesses in Idaho, including restaurants and specialty stores, that employ other Idahoans.^{a,g} Since 2002, refugees have created more than 200 new businesses in Idaho.^a

Outside of economic contributions, refugees help Idaho become more diverse and culturally enrich our local communities.

Concluding remarks

Refugees have been an important part of Idaho’s culture and community since the 1970s and have integrated and adapted as U.S. residents. Nevertheless, refugee resettlement is an important policy issue of concern to many people. Avenues for public discussion, community-building events, and availability of objective information are needed to create better public understanding and guide sound policy decision-making regarding this complex but important issue. For more information, see:

- ◆ The Idaho Office for Refugees—www.idahorefugees.org
- ◆ Neighbors United—neighborsunitedboise.org/
- ◆ UNHCR, The U.N. Refugee Agency—www.unrefugees.org
- ◆ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services—www.uscis.gov
- ◆ Office of Refugee Resettlement—www.acf.hhs.gov/orr

SOURCES:

- a—Idaho Office for Refugees, *2015 Idaho Refugee Program Background Informational Packet*.
- b—U.S. Department of State, “Proposed Refugee Admissions for FY 2016: Report to the U.S. Congress.”
- c—International Rescue Committee, “U.S. Refugee Admission Program Overview.”
- d—UNHCR, The U.N. Refugee Agency, *The Refugee Convention*.
- e—The White House, “The Screening Process for Refugee Entry into the United States.”
- f—College of Southern Idaho, *Idaho Refugee Program*.
- g—Interviews with Zeze Rwasama (College of Southern Idaho, 30 June 2016), Mike Roth (Si-Ellen Dairy, 29 June 2016), Patty Haller and Jan Reeves (Idaho Office for Refugees, July 6 2016).
- h—Idaho Office for Refugees.
- i—U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, *Preparing for your Asylum Interview*.

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