



## **RIGOROUS SECURITY SCREENING OF REFUGEES RESETTLED TO THE UNITED STATES<sup>i</sup>**

Refugee situations are traditionally resolved through three durable solutions: voluntary repatriation whereby refugees flee to nearby countries and when peace comes they voluntarily return home in safety and dignity, local integration whereby the neighboring host country allows refugees to permanently settle as full-fledged members of the host country, and, resettlement whereby refugees are rigorously screened in neighboring host countries and referred to distant resettlement countries. Resettlement is a life-saving solution for a small percentage of refugees worldwide (less than one half of one percent). They are often the most vulnerable refugees. The U.S. has a proud tradition of taking over half of the world's resettled refugees. These are the stages of the rigorous U.S. resettlement screening process:

### **STAGE 1 UNHCR Refugee Status and Exclusion Determination**

For most refugees, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) determines whether the person seeking refuge qualifies as a refugee, that is, as someone forced to flee because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. At this stage, UNHCR generally registers the refugee, collects identifying documents, biographical information, and biometric data (e.g., for Syrians they conduct iris scans), and interviews the applicant. Even if the person meets the high standard of the refugee definition, UNHCR reject them if they disqualify due to the “exclusion clauses” of the refugee convention for having committed certain serious, odious acts or serious crimes described in the clauses.

### **STAGE 2 Referral to the United States for Resettlement**

A refugee who meets the refugee definition and has no exclusion bar may be eligible to be considered for resettlement to the United States only if he/she also falls within preference categories for U.S. resettlement. These categories include people with extreme vulnerabilities, characteristics of special concern to the United States, or immediate family member ties in the United States. UNHCR, a U.S. Embassy, or a trained Non-Governmental Organization may refer individuals if they meet both the refugee definition and the resettlement criteria.

### **STAGE 3 Resettlement Support Center Case Preparation**

The U.S. Department of State contracts with Resettlement Support Centers (RSC) in several refugee host countries around the world. The RSC interviews those who have been referred, organizes their on-site processing, orients them to the process, and prepares their files. The RSC gathers each refugee's personal data and background information for the security clearance process and to present the case to the Refugee Corp of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS/USCIS) in preparation for each in-person interview.

### **STAGE 4 Security Screening—Consular Lookout & Support System**

Using the information gathered by the RSC, the State Department checks the names of all the refugees that have been referred for U.S. resettlement through the Consular Lookout & Support System (CLASS) data base. CLASS contains extensive watch-list information.

### **STAGE 5 Security Screening—Security Advisory Opinion**

If needed, there is an additional security review known as a Security Advisory Opinion (SAO). If subject to an SAO review, an applicant can proceed with the U.S. resettlement process only if there is positive clearance from several U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

### **STAGE 6 Security Screening –Inter-Agency Checks**

The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) carries out Inter-Agency Checks (IAC) on applicants who meet the minimum age requirement. Since the IAC is a “recurrent vetting” process, NCTC will notify DHS/USCIS of any negative information about the applicant up until travel to the United States.

## **STAGE 7 Security Screening—Syria Enhanced Review**

Refugees from Syria who are referred to the United States for resettlement receive additional screening known as Syria Enhanced Review. A Refugee Affairs Division Officer at DHS/USCIS headquarters conducts this review prior to a Syrian refugee being interviewed by DHS/USCIS. If the review triggers fraud or security concerns, it is further referred to DHS's Fraud Detection and National Security Division (FDNSD) for further review. FDNSD conducts research of public and classified sources related to the person's case, compiling a report that the interviewing officer can use in preparation for the interview.

## **STAGE 8 DHS In-depth, In-Person Interview**

All refugee applicants are interviewed by the Refugee Corp of DHS/USCIS. A trained Refugee Corp officer travels to the refugee host country, and conducts an in-depth, face-to-face interview with each refugee applicant being considered for resettlement and any accompanying family members over age 14. Based on the refugee's case file, the interview, and extensive country of origin information and other information available to DHS, the DHS/USCIS officer will determine if the individual qualifies as a refugee and is admissible under U.S. law.

## **STAGE 9 DHS Determination**

The DHS/USCIS determines whether the individual meets the refugee definition and meets extensive U.S. admission requirements, including overcoming numerous bars triggered by criminal or terrorist activities. They determine whether the person meets the resettlement criteria. They also determine whether the person is barred as someone firmly resettled in the refugee host country. If the applicant meets this rigorous test, the officer conditionally approves the resettlement request, submitting it to the U.S. Department of State to finalize. The conditional approval does not become an approval unless and until the person has been cleared through all security checks (Stages 4, 5, 6, 7, and 10).

## **STAGE 10 Security Clearance Procedure—Three U.S. Government Agency Biometric Checks**

At the time of the DHS interview, U.S. government staff take fingerprints and photographs of all refugees applying for resettlement (who meet the minimum age requirement). DHS/USCIS coordinates vetting the fingerprints against biometric data bases of the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

## **STAGE 11 Medical Screening**

The U.S. government requires that all refugee applicants approved for resettlement undergo medical screening. Medical personnel are from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or are designated by the local U.S. Embassy. They screen for communicable diseases that might prohibit the refugee's admission to the United States.

## **STAGE 12 Matching Refugees with a Voluntary Agency**

Each refugee is assigned to a Voluntary Agency in the U.S., such as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS). USCCB/MRS works in partnership with local Catholic Charities and Catholic Social Service partners across the country to receive and place refugees, to help them build resilience and self-sufficiency, and to work side by side with local communities and States to build safe, welcoming communities for locals and newcomers alike. Over the 35 years of the U.S. resettlement program over 160 of 195 U.S. Catholic dioceses have joined to welcome refugees through this life-affirming public-private partnership.

## **STAGE 13 Cultural Orientation**

The RSCs or other designated trainers provide cultural orientation to refugees after they are approved for U.S. resettlement. The cultural training helps them prepare for their travel to America and their new life here.

## **STAGE 14 Admission to the United States**

When a refugee arrives at a U.S. airport designated as a port of entry for refugee admissions, the DHS Customs and Border Protection (DHS/CBP) officer reviews the refugee's documentation and conducts two additional security checks against the National Targeting Center Passenger Program and the Transportation Security Administration's Secure Flight Program. This assures that the arriving person is the same as the refugee who was screened and approved for U.S. admission and resettlement.

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<sup>1</sup>See U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants' [Security Screening of Refugees Admitted to the United States: A Detailed, Rigorous Process](#), Human Rights First's "[Bars and Screening in the Asylum & Refugee Process](#)", and the Department of Homeland Security's "[United States Refugee Admissions Program](#)." We thank USCRI. We used their framework and careful analysis to help lay out and detail the screening process and also benefitted from the backgrounders of DHS and HRF.