

Welcoming Refugees After Paris Attacks – FAQs

This FAQ is a compilation of existing information from national sources including: The White House, UNHCR, time.com, thinkprogress.org, and cnn.com. This material is being used to provide background information for questions that may come up during conversations with those who are unfamiliar with the refugee program. We strongly suggest leading with Welcoming America's talking points and not using this set of FAQs for wide distribution.

Who is a refugee?

A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal, and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.

How do refugees come to the United States?

The United States handpicks the refugees who resettle here, and they go through multiple layers of security checks, making them the most thoroughly vetted group of travelers to the United States. Security screenings are rigorous and involve the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the FBI, the Department of Defense, and multiple intelligence agencies.

Steps:

1. Potential refugees first register for refugee status through the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the international body in charge of protecting and assisting refugees. The registration process includes in-depth refugee interviews, home country reference checks, and biological screening such as iris scans.
2. Among those who pass background checks, a small percentage are referred for overseas resettlement based on criteria designed to determine the most vulnerable cases. This group may include survivors of torture, victims of sexual violence, targets of political persecution, the medically needy, families with multiple children, and a female head of household.
3. Once a refugee is referred to the United States for resettlement but prior to being granted entry, the United States conducts its own intensive screening. Security checks are an integral part of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) for applicants of all nationalities, and coordinating these checks is a shared responsibility between the State Department and DHS.
4. A DHS officer conducts in-person interviews with every applicant. All available biographic and biometric information is vetted against a broad array of law enforcement, intelligence community, and other relevant databases to help confirm a refugee applicant's identity, check for any criminal or other derogatory information, and identify information that could inform lines of questioning during the interview. Additionally, Syrian refugees go through an additional layer of screening, the Syria Enhanced Review process.

5. The United States screening process includes consultation from nine different government agencies, such as the National Counterterrorism Center, the FBI's Terrorist Screening Center, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of State, and the Department of Defense.
6. A refugee applicant cannot be approved for travel until all required security checks have been completed and cleared. Unlike the situation with the asylum seekers in Europe, this extensive screening process happens *before* refugees enter the United States. The whole process takes an average of 18-24 months.

How many Syrian refugees have been resettled in the United States?

U.S. government data shows that just under 2,200 Syrian refugees have been admitted into the United States since the civil war broke out in March of 2011, and the vast majority of those were in the last year. More than half of the Syrian refugees admitted into the United States so far are children.

President Obama has set a goal of admitting 10,000 Syrian refugees by October 2016. The Administration's emphasis is on admitting the most vulnerable Syrians -- particularly survivors of violence and torture, those with severe medical conditions, and women and children -- in a manner that is consistent with U.S. national security.

Can my governor refuse to admit Syrian refugees?*

No. There is no lawful way that permits a governor to dictate if we admit refugees. Refugee resettlement is a federal program governed by federal law. The President has explicit statutory authorization to accept foreign refugees into the United States. Under the Refugee Act of 1980, the president may admit refugees who face "persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion" into the United States, and the president's power to do so is particularly robust if they determine that an "unforeseen emergency refugee situation" such as the Syrian refugee crisis exists.

Therefore, states cannot unilaterally block resettlement. Governors do not have the legal authority to determine who lives in their states. Syrian refugees are legally admitted to the United States and therefore have the right to move freely throughout the country. Suggesting otherwise is an attack on fundamental rights that we as Americans hold true and is against everything that we stand for.

**Mayors also do not have the authority to refuse to admit refugees.*