

FAQs: Frequently Asked Questions

Currently, more than 15 million refugees languish outside their country of origin. HOPE comes in the form of a U.S. resettlement placement for less than 1% of refugees and the chance to restore one's life in a safe country.

The U.S. government works with the United Nations to provide resettlement opportunities in the United States. Since 1975, Catholic Charities Maine Refugee and Immigration Services has been the primary provider of resettlement services to refugees in Maine. Catholic Charities Maine Refugee and Immigration Services resettles refugees of all races, religions, and ethnicities.

[Who is a refugee?](#)

[Who are the New Mainers?](#)

[What does it mean to be a primary refugee?](#)

[What does it mean to be a secondary migrant?](#)

[Why might someone move from their initial resettlement site to another state like Maine?](#)

[What are some of the cultural and employment adjustment issues that refugees and asylees face? Are there opportunities to help?](#)

[Are asylees the same as refugees?](#)

[Which countries resettle refugees?](#)

[How many refugees are resettled in the United States?](#)

[How are refugees processed for resettlement in other countries?](#)

[How do refugees get here?](#)

[What services does RIS provide for refugees?](#)

[Are refugees allowed to work?](#)

[Do refugees pay taxes?](#)

[Do refugees choose to come to the United States?](#)

[How long can refugees stay in the US?](#)

[What rights do refugees have?](#)

[What level of English do refugees have?](#)

[What types of jobs do refugees get?](#)

[Can refugees go back home?](#)

[Are there medical conditions that exclude refugees from coming to the US?](#)

[Can refugees become citizens, and if so, when?](#)

[Can refugees file for their families to join them?](#)

[Can refugees afford their apartments?](#)

[Does RIS work with volunteers?](#)

[Are refugees an economic drain on the community?](#)

[Are refugees the same as other immigrants?](#)

[Do refugees take away jobs from US citizens?](#)

Who is a refugee?

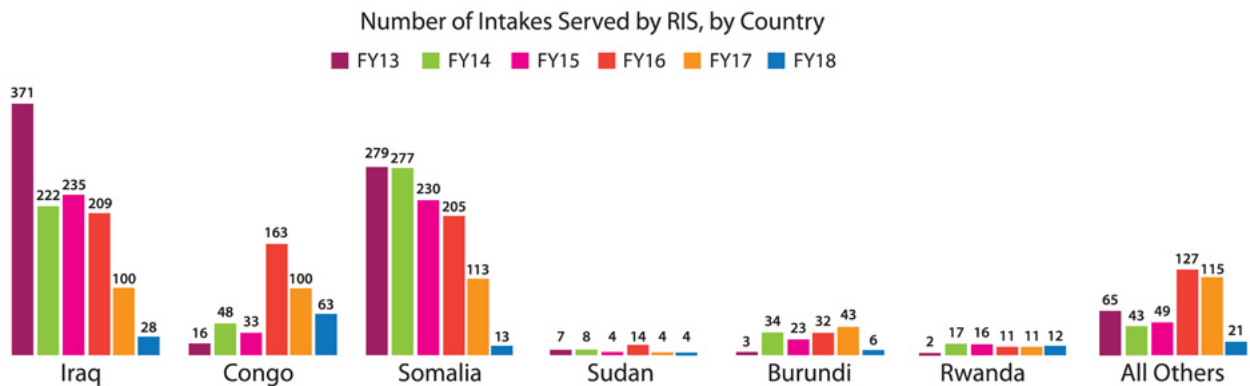
- According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a refugee is defined as:

“Any person who is outside their country of origin and unable or unwilling to return there or to avail themselves of its protection, on account of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular group, or political opinion.”
- Refugees legally enter the United States in search of freedom, peace, and opportunity for themselves and their families.

Who are the New Mainers?

Refugees in Maine have come from over 30 countries in: Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, Former Soviet Republics, Middle East, Eastern Africa, South/Central America, Caribbean and Cuba. Current refugee populations that are coming to Maine are from Somalia, Sudan, Congo, Ethiopia, Burma, Iran and Iraq. Trends in refugee resettlement mirror the conflicts and tragedies that are happening worldwide and as such, Maine has most recently assisted in the resettlement of Eastern African and Middle Eastern refugees.

In the last 40 years, RIS has assisted nearly 10,000 people through its resettlement program and assisted over 20,000 with refugee and asylee support services. In fiscal year 2018, RIS resettled 66 primary refugees and assisted more than 40 secondary migrants and 41 asylees in becoming self-sufficient new members of our community. Similar populations and arrivals are expected to be resettled in FY19.



“All Others” includes: Afghanistan, Angola, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bulgaria, Burkina-Faso, Burma, Camaroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Cuba, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, Iran, Ivory Coast, Kazakhstan, Mali, Russia, Syria, Tanzania, Togo, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam

Number of Intakes Served by RIS by Location, Status FY13-FY18

	PORTLAND						LEWISTON						AUGUSTA				COMBINED					
	FY13	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY13	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY13	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18
Primary	287	264	248	367	182	40	13	128	148	206	104	26	29	50	37	0	350	392	425	623	323	66
Asylee	15	87	72	80	79	41	4	1	5	5	7	0	-	0	0	0	19	88	77	85	86	41
Secondary Migrant	13	23	25	17	30	36	41	33	37	12	7	0	4	5	0	4	54	56	66	34	37	40
Entrant/Parolee	0	1	3	0	0	0	3	-	-	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	3	1	3	0	0	0
SIV (Special Immigrant Visa)	16	14	16	19	35	0	0	8	1	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	16	22	17	19	35	0
Trafficking	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-
US born children*	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	-	-	-	-	-
Total	331	389	366	483	326	107	117	170	191	223	118	26	33	55	37	4	448	559	590	761	481	147

What does it mean to be a primary refugee?

- A primary refugee is a refugee who arrives directly from a country of asylum or house country (refugee camp) to Maine. RIS considers primary refugees to be “newly arrived” for up to one year after their arrival in Maine.
- A refugee legally resides in the country of resettlement and is eligible for federally funded assistance for up to 60 months, and Federal Refugee Cash Assistance for up to 8 months from the date of their arrival.
- Refugees are also eligible for State and City assistance.
- RIS provides primary refugees with initial resettlement (30-90 days post U.S. arrival) and limited ongoing case management and employment services (up to 60 months from U.S. Arrival).

What does it mean to be a secondary migrant?

- A secondary migrant is a person who entered the United States as a refugee and was resettled in one state, but then chose to move to another state. For example, a refugee who was resettled in Chicago, IL, but then chose to move to Portland, Maine, would be considered a secondary migrant when arriving in Maine.
- Approximately 75% of New Mainers are secondary migrants and, unless economically self-sufficient, many secondary migrants rely on a combination of State and City assistance.
- It is important to note that federal funds that support refugee resettlement can only be given once, and that when refugees choose to move to new cities after their initial resettlement, the funding and donations remain in that primary site of resettlement.
- Secondary Migrants residing in the U.S. longer than 8 months are ineligible for Federal Refugee Cash Assistance, but may still receive federally funded assistance up to 60 months, including MaineCare and Food Stamps, from the date of their U.S. arrival.
- In Portland, case management services are provided by the City of Portland Refugee Services Program to secondary migrants who have been in the U.S. for more than 30 days. Catholic Charities RIS provides services to secondary migrants in Portland who have been in the U.S. for less than 30 days, because in some situations the case can be transferred officially from the client’s initial resettlement site to Portland and clients may still be eligible for time limited federal programs (Match Grant) for new arrivals. In Lewiston, Catholic Charities RIS provides services to all secondary migrants, who arrived in the U.S within the last 60 months.

Why might someone move from their initial resettlement site to another state like Maine?

Unless a refugee can identify relatives in a particular state within the United States while they are being processed for resettlement overseas, they will have no choice in where they are resettled. In many cases, the secondary migrants moving to Maine are leaving initial resettlement sites that are large urban areas, in which they were placed in low income neighborhoods plagued by gangs, drugs, and high rates of violent crime. They fear for the safety of their families and move to states like Maine, to reunify with relatives, friends, and community members who live here and commend Maine's safe communities, schools, and affordable housing. Secondary migrants come to Maine for the same reasons that many other groups of new residents do. They come here for, "The way life should be."

What are some of the cultural and employment adjustment issues that refugees and asylees face? Are there opportunities to help?

- Adjustment to the US culture (school, work, communities) and basic living skills can be a challenge for new arrivals. Imagine the difficulty for someone who has walked everywhere they ever needed to go having to learn how to take a bus to a job when they aren't familiar with the city, the language, or the where the bus might stop? How does a mother that has always cooked on an open fire to prepare meals learn how to cook with a gas stove or microwave? What does a family that has lived only in warm climates wear when the weather turns colder and they see snow for the first time? Every day and every season offers a new challenge that is different from their normal routine and even though case managers can assist them in increasing their life skills and knowledge of U.S. culture, refugees will often learn from watching others in their communities or through the connections and friendships they make with other Maine residents.
- Because refugees arrive in Maine from different countries (both developed and developing) they often have a wide range of differing levels of skills and education. Some have attended college and worked in established industries in their native countries, while others come from agricultural based economies and are excellent farmers, but lack reading and writing skills in their own languages. These different backgrounds result in different employment opportunities for refugees in Maine. Many refugees with little to no education begin in low skill level jobs like manufacturing and housekeeping, while others pursue jobs in their previous fields of employment like nursing and construction.
- The generosity of Maine residents to extend themselves and volunteer their time as "American Friends" to refugee arrivals has helped many new refugee families learn about life in Maine, from how to use local transportation, where to buy groceries, and how they can participate in community events, to assistance to families and children with English language skills and after school homework. Visit our volunteer link for more opportunities to help!

Are asylees the same as refugees?

While the need for protection may be similar to a refugee, asylees enter the U.S. very differently and are therefore entitled to different levels of assistance.

- An asylee is an individual who has sought protection from fear of persecution by submitting an asylum application to the United States Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS) and asking to be granted political asylum to reside in the United States.
- Refugees are brought to the U.S via the U.S. Refugee Resettlement program after numerous interviews and screenings confirming their refugee status, while asylees enter the U.S. on student or work visas or as undocumented individuals and then petition the U.S. government for asylum.
- Because asylees are not being resettled by the U.S. government, but have instead petitioned the government for and been granted asylum, they are only provided limited cash and case management assistance.

- While pending their receipt of asylum, asylee seekers are eligible for Food Stamps, Medicare, and Cash Assistance, including City General Assistance as determined by DHHS. Asylum seeker work permits can be granted after 150 days from the date USCIS accepts their case for asylum.
- When they are granted asylum, if they are not employed, they can receive Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA), Food Stamps, and Refugee Medical Assistance (RMA). Asylees are only eligible for RCA and RMA for up to 8 months from the date of their granted asylum. Asylees (and refugees) are also eligible for enrollment in the Match Grant, a federal program geared towards employment and self-sufficiency, if they enroll within 30 days of their granted asylum. Prior to and during participation in the Match program, refugees and asylees cannot access state assistance benefits.
- Individuals who are pending or seeking asylum can be served by General Assistance offices in all municipalities in Maine. Individuals who have been granted asylum (i.e. asylees) can be served by Catholic Charities RIS.

Which countries resettle refugees?

The United States is one of many countries (Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland) that work with the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\)](#) to provide resettlement opportunities for refugees needing international assistance and long term durable solutions to their situation.

According to the UNHCR and the [US Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration](#), although “fewer than 1% of refugees worldwide are ever resettled, resettlement remains a vital tool for providing international protection and for meeting the special needs of individual refugees who are unable to return home.”

How many refugees are resettled in the United States?

Each fiscal year, the [U.S. Department of State](#) develops a refugee program proposal for the approval of Congress and the signature of the president.

- In FY16, the U.S. government agreed that a maximum of 85,000 refugees could be considered for resettlement in the United States, based on humanitarian concerns or national interest.
- Admission levels for the various populations in need worldwide were allocated as follows:

Near East/South Asia	34,000 people
East Asia	13,000 people
Africa	25,000 people
Latin America/Caribbean	3,000 people
Europe/Central Asia	4,000 people
Unallocated Reserve	6,000 people

**This amount is reserved for unexpected humanitarian crisis and natural disasters, like Hurricane Katrina.*

- Each refugee case approved for admission to the United States is resettled by one of ten “voluntary agencies” (VOLAGs) participating in the U.S. Reception & Placement program under a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of State. Each state has an obligation to assist in refugee resettlement.
- Catholic Charities Maine Refugee & Immigration Services (RIS) is under contract with one of those ten VOLAGs, the [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops](#), which designates RIS to resettle refugees in Maine.

- As a refugee resettlement agency, RIS provides refugee Reception and Placement services including pre-arrival, orientation, information and referral, emergency financial assistance, housing and health care in compliance with the Cooperative Agreement between the U.S. Department of State and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.
- RIS completes an annual capacity survey for USCCB to submit to the State Department identifying the current populations and languages spoken in the resettlement site, as well information on average wage, employment, housing, health care, etc. to assess the number of new refugees that the state can resettle each fiscal year. This is done with input and approval from the State of Maine's State Refugee Coordinator.
- RIS is able to provide services to refugees beyond their initial reception and placement period (30-90days maximum from date of U.S. arrival) when awarded funds from the [Office of Refugee Resettlement \(ORR\)](#).
- Currently ORR supports RIS to provide more extensive refugee case management services in the areas of employment, cultural adjustment, English as a second language classes, citizenship & literacy, elder services, and wrap around case management for survivors of torture and human trafficking for labor and sexual exploitation.

How are refugees processed for resettlement in other countries?

1. A person or family flees their country for fear of persecution and seeks protection and asylum in a neighboring country's refugee camp.
2. UNHCR conducts interviews with the person(s) to assess whether or not they qualify to be given refugee status.
3. If they are classified as a refugee by UNHCR, the individual is given residency and aid in the refugee camp.
4. They will later go through an additional series of interviews to verify their story of persecution and flight and to identify if they have any relatives already resettled in other countries that they might be able to join.
5. Before a refugee is accepted for resettlement in the United States, the [Department of Homeland Security \(DHS\)](#) conducts numerous security screenings of their eligibility for admission into the U.S. In addition, all refugees are medically screened prior to departure for resettlement in the U.S. and all refugees sign a travel loan document agreeing to pay back the cost of their flight to the U.S. The rate of repayment once in the United States is over 85%.

How do refugees get here?

Refugees are people who have fled their home countries due to persecution involving their race, religion, national origin, political ideology, or being a member of a certain social group. Refugees are screened and processed to come to the US under the auspices of the US State Department.

What services does RIS provide for refugees?

RIS provides [Case Management](#), [Corporate Training](#), [Elder Services](#), [Employment Services](#), [Interpretation & Translation Services](#) and [Mentoring Programs](#).

Are refugees allowed to work?

Yes, in fact refugees are encouraged to be employed.

Do refugees pay taxes?

Yes, when refugees start working, they start paying into the tax system.

Do refugees choose to come to the United States?

No one ever chooses to become a refugee, and refugees are grateful for the opportunity to start their lives over in safety and security. Some may be predetermined to come to the US to join family members who have come before them, while the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) refers others to the U.S.

How long can refugees stay in the US?

Refugees may stay in the US indefinitely. They are provided with a pathway to citizenship and usually can apply within five years.

What rights do refugees have?

Refugees have the same rights and responsibilities as US citizens. However, they cannot vote until they become a citizen, and they cannot hold certain elected offices.

What level of English do refugees have?

Refugees have varying levels of English proficiency when they arrive — ranging from little or no proficiency to fluency. Most often, even those who have very good English need assistance perfecting pronunciation and learning “American” English.

What types of jobs do refugees get?

Due to language barriers — or professional skills that do not easily transfer to the US job market — many refugees start out in entry-level jobs while they are working on their language skills or other job-related certification. Refugees are required to take the first job that becomes available to them.

Can refugees go back home?

Refugees have freedom of movement. However, if they return to their home country they may jeopardize their refugee status. Refugees must apply for a Refugee Travel Document through Immigration to travel outside of the U.S.

Are there medical conditions that exclude refugees from coming to the US?

Yes, there are certain medical conditions that are excludable. These include active (not positive) TB, extreme mental retardation, and Hansen’s disease.

Can refugees become citizens, and if so, when?

Yes, refugees may become US citizens after they have been in the country for five years. They must first apply for permanent residency after one year in the US.

Can refugees file for their families to join them?

Yes, refugees from specified countries may file for certain relatives to join them in the United States. RIS assists refugee clients with this process whenever possible.

Can refugees afford their apartments?

While it is certainly very difficult to start over again, the majority of refugees transition to self-sufficiency within a short time after arrival. Like others with limited income who are just getting on their feet, setting priorities is crucial for refugees. RIS assists refugee families with applying for subsidized housing when appropriate.

Does RIS work with volunteers?

Yes, the work of RIS depends heavily on local volunteer, in-kind, and private financial support to assist refugees in the resettlement process. Check out our current [volunteer opportunities](#) to get involved.

Are refugees an economic drain on the community?

The economic impact of refugees on local communities is very small. Refugee Resettlement is a federal program designed to temporarily host refugee families while they transition to self-sufficiency. Because the program is only partially funded by the government, RIS depends on local volunteers, in-kind support, and cash donations.

Are refugees the same as other immigrants?

Yes and no! All refugees are immigrants, but not all immigrants are refugees. Refugees are allowed into the US by the federal government for humanitarian reasons, and receive temporary financial support. Other immigrants come to the US under different criteria and must show that they will be self-supporting before they enter the US.

Do refugees take away jobs from US citizens?

Historically, no. Due to language barriers and employment skills that may not transfer easily to the US job market, many refugees initially take entry-level positions that do not require English proficiency. Also, many refugees work two or more entry-level, low-wage jobs so that they may become financially stable and independent.