

# SECURITY SCREENING OF REFUGEES ADMITTED TO THE UNITED STATES: A DETAILED, RIGOROUS PROCESS

Resettlement is considered a durable solution for refugees who cannot return to their countries of origin or integrate into the current country that is hosting them. Resettlement to a country like the U.S. presents a life-saving alternative for a very small number of refugees around the world (less than one half of one percent). Refugees seeking resettlement in the United States must pass through a number of steps aimed at ensuring that they will not pose a security risk to the United States.

## —STEP 1

**Refugee Status:** In most cases the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) determines that the individual qualifies as a refugee under international law. **A refugee is someone who has fled from his or her home country and cannot return because he or she has a well-founded fear of persecution based on religion, race, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.**

## —STEP 2

**Referral to the United States:** A refugee that meets one of the criteria for resettlement in the United States is referred to the U.S. government by UNHCR, a U.S. Embassy, or a trained Non-Governmental Organization.

## —STEP 3

**Resettlement Support Center:** A Resettlement Support Center (RSC), contracted by the U.S. Department of State, compiles the refugee's personal data and background information for the security clearance process and to present to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) for an in-person interview.

## —STEP 4

**Security Clearance Process:** With information collected by the RSC, a number of security checks are conducted. The State Department runs the names of all refugees referred to the United States for resettlement through a standard CLASS (Consular Lookout and Support System) name check. In addition, enhanced interagency security checks were phased in beginning in 2008 and applied to all refugee applicants by 2010.

## —STEP 5

**Security Clearance Process:** Certain refugees undergo an additional security review called a Security Advisory Opinion (SAO). These cases require a positive SAO clearance from a number of U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies in order to continue the resettlement process. When required, this step runs concurrently with Step 4.

*\*Note that under limited circumstances, refugee applicants may be interviewed in their home country rather than in a country of asylum.*



U.S. COMMITTEE FOR REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS  
2231 Crystal Drive, Suite 350 • Arlington, VA 22202 • Tel: (703)310.1130 • Fax: (703)769.4241

[www.refugees.org](http://www.refugees.org)

## —STEP 6

**Security Clearance Process:** Refugees who meet the minimum age requirement have their fingerprints and photograph taken by a trained U.S. government employee, usually on the same day as their DHS interview. The fingerprints are then checked against various U.S. government databases and information on any matches is reviewed by DHS.

## —STEP 7

**In-person Interview:** All refugee applicants are interviewed by an officer from **DHS's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)**. A trained officer will travel to the country of asylum\* to conduct a detailed, face-to-face interview with each refugee applicant being considered for resettlement. Based on the information in the refugee's case file and on the interview, the DHS officer will determine if the individual qualifies as a refugee and is admissible under U.S. law.

## —STEP 8

**DHS Approval:** If the USCIS officer finds that the individual qualifies as a refugee and meets other U.S. admission criteria, the officer will conditionally approve the refugee's application for resettlement and submit it to the U.S. Department of State for final processing. Conditional approvals become final once the results of all security checks (Steps 4, 5, and 6) have been received and cleared.

## —STEP 9

**Medical Screening:** All refugee applicants approved for resettlement in the U.S. are required to undergo medical screening conducted by the International Organization for Migration or a physician designated by the U.S. Embassy.

## —STEP 10

**Matching Refugees with a Sponsor Agency:** Every refugee is assigned to a Voluntary Agency in the U.S., such as the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI). USCRI will place refugees with a local partner agency or office that will assist refugees upon their arrival in the U.S.

## —STEP 11

**Cultural Orientation:** In addition, refugees approved for resettlement are offered cultural orientation while waiting for final processing, to prepare them for their journey to and initial resettlement in the United States.

## —STEP 12

**Security Clearance Process:** Prior to departure to the U.S., a second interagency check is conducted for most refugees to check for any new information. Refugees must clear this check in order to depart to the U.S.

## —STEP 13

**Admission to the United States:** Upon arrival at one of five U.S. airports designated as ports of entry for refugee admissions, a Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officer will review the refugee documentation and conduct additional security checks to ensure that the arriving refugee is the same person who was screened and approved for admission to the United States.