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# Reception and Placement of Refugees in the United States

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*Congressional Research Service*

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# Reception and Placement of Refugees in the United States

## **Abstract**

[Excerpt] The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), which is managed by the Department of State (DOS), resettles refugees from around the world in the United States. Once a refugee case is approved for U.S. resettlement, the USRAP determines where in the country the refugee(s) will be resettled. This determination is made through DOS's Reception and Placement Program (R&P), which provides initial resettlement services to arriving refugees. R&P initial resettlement assistance is separate from longer-term resettlement assistance provided through the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR).

Each year, DOS's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) requests proposals from public and private nonprofit organizations that are interested in providing services and assistance to refugees under the R&P Program. It then enters into a cooperative agreement with each successful applicant. The organizations, sometimes referred to as voluntary agencies, maintain nationwide networks of local affiliates to provide services to refugees. The services include pre-arrival services (e.g., placement); reception on arrival in the United States; basic needs support (e.g., housing, furnishings, food, and clothing) for at least 30 days; and help accessing health, employment, education, and other services, as needed. Funding comes from the R&P Program and contributions from other sources.

Decisions about which R&P agencies will resettle particular approved refugee cases are made at weekly meetings in which representatives of the resettlement agencies review biographic and other information about incoming refugees. As part of the "sponsorship assurance" process, an agency agrees to assume responsibility for a refugee case and provide required R&P services. Once refugees are in the United States, however, they do not have to remain in their initial placement area. They can relocate at any time.

The R&P Program is subject to a set of statutory requirements. Regarding the placement process, the ORR director and the agency administering the R&P Program are required to consult regularly with state and local governments and resettlement agencies about the intended distribution of refugees among the states and localities. The agency administering the R&P Program is further required to consider the recommendations of the state in determining where to place refugees within a state.

As of May 31, 2017, in FY2017, refugee arrivals have been placed in the District of Columbia and every state except Wyoming. In FY2016, the only states with no refugee placements were Delaware and Hawaii.

## **Keywords**

refugees, placement, resettlement, reception, United States

## **Comments**

### **Suggested Citation**

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# Reception and Placement of Refugees in the United States

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## Summary

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), which is managed by the Department of State (DOS), resettles refugees from around the world in the United States. Once a refugee case is approved for U.S. resettlement, the USRAP determines where in the country the refugee(s) will be resettled. This determination is made through DOS's Reception and Placement Program (R&P), which provides initial resettlement services to arriving refugees. R&P initial resettlement assistance is separate from longer-term resettlement assistance provided through the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR).

Each year, DOS's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) requests proposals from public and private nonprofit organizations that are interested in providing services and assistance to refugees under the R&P Program. It then enters into a cooperative agreement with each successful applicant. The organizations, sometimes referred to as voluntary agencies, maintain nationwide networks of local affiliates to provide services to refugees. The services include pre-arrival services (e.g., placement); reception on arrival in the United States; basic needs support (e.g., housing, furnishings, food, and clothing) for at least 30 days; and help accessing health, employment, education, and other services, as needed. Funding comes from the R&P Program and contributions from other sources.

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The R&P Program is subject to a set of statutory requirements. Regarding the placement process, the ORR director and the agency administering the R&P Program are required to consult regularly with state and local governments and resettlement agencies about the intended distribution of refugees among the states and localities. The agency administering the R&P Program is further required to consider the recommendations of the state in determining where to place refugees within a state.

As of May 31, 2017, in FY2017, refugee arrivals have been placed in the District of Columbia and every state except Wyoming. In FY2016, the only states with no refugee placements were Delaware and Hawaii.

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## Introduction

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), which is managed by the Department of State (DOS), resettles refugees from around the world in the United States. Under U.S. law, a refugee is a person fleeing his or her country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.<sup>1</sup> Once a refugee case is approved for U.S. resettlement, the USRAP determines where in the country the refugee(s) will be resettled. This determination is made through DOS's Reception and Placement Program (R&P), which provides initial resettlement services to arriving refugees.

The placement of refugees, especially Syrians, in the United States has been highly controversial in recent years. Some states have attempted to stop the resettlement of Syrian refugees within their borders.<sup>2</sup> In his March 6, 2017, executive order, "Protecting The Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into The United States," President Trump expressed support for greater state and local government involvement in the placement of refugees:

The Secretary of State shall examine existing law to determine the extent to which, consistent with applicable law, State and local jurisdictions may have greater involvement in the process of determining the placement or resettlement of refugees in their jurisdictions, and shall devise a proposal to lawfully promote such involvement.<sup>3</sup>

## Initial Resettlement Assistance

The Refugee Act of 1980 amended the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA)<sup>4</sup> to establish a process for refugee admissions and authorize federal assistance to resettle refugees in the United States. The latter provisions established the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and authorized various forms of refugee resettlement assistance, including a program for initial resettlement of refugees in the United States.<sup>5</sup> The Refugee Act gave the President the authority to determine whether this initial resettlement program should be administered by ORR or another office; DOS had previously been responsible for initial refugee resettlement. President Jimmy Carter subsequently determined that DOS should retain administration of this program, known as the Reception and Placement Program.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See CRS Report RL31269, *Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Policy*.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Muzaffar Chishti and Sarah Pierce, *U.S. Meets 2016 Syrian Refugee Admission Goal; Opposition to New Resettlement Mounts*, Migration Policy Institute, September 28, 2016. For discussion of the relevant legal issues, see archived CRS Legal Sidebar WSLG1440, *Can States and Localities Bar the Resettlement of Syrian Refugees Within Their Jurisdictions?*

<sup>3</sup> Executive Order 13780, "Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States," 82 *Federal Register* 13209, 13216, March 9, 2017. This provision appears in Section 6 of the executive order, along with language to suspend the USRAP for 120 days. As of the date of this report, federal courts are blocking implementation of parts of this order, including Section 6.

<sup>4</sup> The Refugee Act is P.L. 96-212. The INA is Act of June 27, 1952, ch. 477, codified, as amended, at 8 U.S.C. §§1101 et seq.

<sup>5</sup> The Refugee Act also authorized longer-term resettlement assistance that is administered by ORR. For an overview of this assistance and related funding, see CRS Report RL31269, *Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Policy*, by Andorra Bruno.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. President (Carter), "Letter to the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate Transmitting a Study. January 13, 1981," Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, vol. 17 (January 20, 1981), p. 2879.

Each year, DOS's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) requests proposals from public and private nonprofit organizations that are interested in providing services and assistance to refugees under the R&P Program; PRM enters into a cooperative agreement with each successful applicant. The organizations, sometimes referred to as voluntary agencies, maintain nationwide networks of local affiliates to provide services to refugees.<sup>7</sup> The services include pre-arrival services (e.g., placement); reception upon arrival in the United States; basic needs support (e.g., housing, furnishings, food, and clothing) for at least 30 days; and help accessing health, employment, education, and other services, as needed. The R&P Program primarily serves aliens who are admitted to the United States as refugees, but others, such as Iraqi and Afghan special immigrants, may also receive benefits.<sup>8</sup>

## Placement of Refugees

Decisions about which R&P agencies will resettle particular approved refugee cases are made at weekly meetings in which resettlement agency representatives review biographic and other information about incoming refugees. As part of the "sponsorship assurance" process, an agency agrees to assume responsibility for a refugee case and provide required R&P services.

A refugee with relatives or close friends in the United States will likely be resettled near them. "Otherwise, the resettlement agency that agrees to sponsor the case decides on the best match between a community's resources and the refugee's needs."<sup>9</sup> With some exceptions, refugees with U.S. ties are placed within 100 miles of, and within the same state as, the local affiliate providing them with R&P services. Refugees without U.S. ties must be placed within 50 miles of, and within the same state as, their local affiliate.

As of May 31, 2017, in FY2017, refugee arrivals have been placed in the District of Columbia and every state except Wyoming. In FY2016, the only states with no refugee placements were Delaware and Hawaii. (See **Appendix** for refugee placement data for FY2011-FY2017.)

Regardless of their initial placement location, however, refugees in the United States are free to relocate. The movement from the placement location to another area is known as secondary migration.

## Related Requirements

The INA provisions on refugee resettlement assistance set requirements for the R&P Program's placement process. Under these provisions, the ORR director and the agency administering the R&P Program (that is, PRM) are directed to consult at least quarterly with state and local governments and nonprofit resettlement agencies about the intended distribution of refugees.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For FY2017, the participating agencies are (1) Church World Service, (2) Episcopal Migration Ministries, (3) Ethiopian Community Development Council, (4) HIAS (formerly, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), (5) International Rescue Committee, (6) Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, (7) United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, (8) U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, and (9) World Relief.

<sup>8</sup> Congress has established several special immigrant visa programs to enable certain Iraqi and Afghan nationals who worked for the U.S. government in Iraq or Afghanistan to gain lawful permanent residence in the United States. See CRS Report R43725, *Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Programs*, by Andorra Bruno.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, *The Reception and Placement Program*, <https://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/receptionplacement/index.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> 8 U.S.C. §1522(a)(2)(A).

The ORR director is further tasked with developing and implementing, in consultation with the resettlement agencies and state and local governments, policies for the placement and resettlement of refugees in the United States.<sup>11</sup> To the extent practicable, these policies are to

- insure that an arriving refugee is not placed in an area that is highly impacted by refugees unless the new arrival has close family in the area;
- provide for local affiliates of resettlement agencies to meet at least quarterly with state and local governments to plan and coordinate the appropriate placement of arriving refugees in the states and localities; and
- consider the proportion of refugees in the local population; the availability of employment, affordable housing, and other resources for refugees in the area; the likelihood of refugees becoming self-sufficient; and the likely secondary migration of refugees to and from the area.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, the agency administering the R&P Program is directed to consider the recommendations of a state in determining where to place refugees within that state.<sup>13</sup>

As part of PRM's annual R&P Program request for proposals, each current R&P agency and new applicant is required to provide data and narrative information about the agency and its affiliates. The FY2017 R&P request for proposals included the following criteria for evaluating the placement portion of the proposals:

Documented local affiliate ability to provide quality, language-appropriate reception and placement services for arriving refugees of diverse backgrounds. Explanation of how the applicant will respond to an increased or decreased resettlement need while ensuring the required level of service to all refugees. Evidence of community support for local affiliates and for the refugee program. Documented contributions of significant private resources to the R&P Program at the local level.<sup>14</sup>

Additional documentation is required when an applicant is proposing to establish a new resettlement site:

Prior to proposing a new site, applicants must consult with stakeholders in the proposed new site. The rationale should document all such community consultations, including what topics were discussed, who was consulted, when meetings were held, and the outcome of the discussions. Participation shall include, at minimum, representation from the following offices: state refugee coordinator; state refugee health coordinator; local governance (city and/or county, as applicable); local and/or county public health, welfare, and social services; and public education. In these consultations, applicants shall discuss the size and scope of the proposed program, and the participant stakeholders' abilities to adequately receive and serve the proposed caseload.<sup>15</sup>

## **Remote Placement**

Under the R&P Program, as noted, initial resettlement services are provided to newly arriving refugees by a local affiliate of one of the participating resettlement agencies. Thus, as a general

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<sup>11</sup> 8 U.S.C. § 1522(a)(2)(B).

<sup>12</sup> 8 U.S.C. § 1522(a)(2)(C).

<sup>13</sup> 8 U.S.C. § 1522(a)(2)(D).

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, *FY 2017 Notice of Funding Opportunity for Reception and Placement Program*, <https://www.state.gov/j/prm/funding/fy2017/254909.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



matter, refugees are not resettled in states that do not have any local affiliates or in parts of states that do not have local affiliates within an allowable distance (see “Placement of Refugees”). Special arrangements, however, may be made by the R&P Program in cases in which an arriving refugee has family or close friends who live more than 100 miles from the nearest R&P affiliate within the same state. In these cases, known as remote placement cases, the R&P Program can arrange for a social service agency or other organization located in the general area where the family or friends live to assist in providing R&P services to the refugee. As of the date of this report, two states—Wyoming and Mississippi—have no local affiliates, but refugees can still be resettled in these states through the remote placement process.

## Funding

The resettlement agencies participating in the R&P Program provide initial resettlement services using a combination of R&P Program funds and contributions from other sources.<sup>16</sup> **Table 1** shows obligated funds for the Reception and Placement Program since FY2011.<sup>17</sup> This funding includes a per refugee grant, which is provided to the local affiliate resettling the refugee. For FY2017, the per-refugee grant is \$2,075.<sup>18</sup> Of this total, \$1,125 must be used for direct support of refugees and \$950 is available to the local affiliate to spend on its staff and infrastructure.<sup>19</sup>

**Table 1. Obligations for the Reception and Placement Program, FY2011-FY2016**  
(in millions of dollars)

Fiscal Year	Obligated Funds
2011	\$127.0
2012	\$138.2
2013	\$159.0
2014	\$184.4
2015	\$185.3
2016	\$277.6

**Source:** U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.

**Note:** An obligation is a legal commitment to provide funding.

<sup>16</sup> For funding information about the separate ORR refugee resettlement assistance programs, see CRS Report RL31269, *Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Policy*, by Andorra Bruno.

<sup>17</sup> An obligation is a legal commitment to provide funding. Separate appropriations data are not available for the Reception and Placement Program, which is funded through the DOS Migration & Refugee Assistance (MRA) account (and sometimes, the DOS U.S. Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA) account).

<sup>18</sup> The per capita grant amount has increased unevenly over the years. For example, effective January 1, 2010, DOS doubled the grant from \$900 to \$1,800, maintaining that “the combined level of public and charitable resources available to the program is simply insufficient to do a quality job of initial resettlement,” U.S. Department of State, “Increase to the Refugee Reception and Placement Per Capita Grant,” press release, January 25, 2010; annual increases since then have been more modest.

<sup>19</sup> Of the \$1,125 allotment, the local affiliate must spend \$925 on behalf of refugee associated with grant. The remaining \$200 is a flexible amount that can be spent on that same refugee or any other vulnerable refugee.

## Appendix. Refugee Placement by State

This table shows the number of refugee arrivals that were initially placed in each state, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico during fiscal years 2011 through 2017 (as of May 31, 2017).<sup>20</sup> It does not show the total refugee population in each state in each year. The total for each column represents the total number of refugee admissions to the United States in the corresponding year.

**Table A-1. Initial Placement of Refugees: FY2011-FY2017**

State	FY2011	FY2012	FY2013	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017
Alabama	89	145	129	107	105	120	52
Alaska	87	88	106	141	146	128	55
Arizona	2,168	2,234	3,052	2,964	3,133	4,110	2,040
Arkansas	3	10	7	7	13	8	43
California	4,987	5,173	6,383	6,108	5,718	7,909	4,516
Colorado	1,557	1,458	1,789	1,813	1,730	1,647	1,026
Connecticut	447	434	547	543	519	819	379
Delaware	16	0	6	0	9	0	9
District of Columbia	33	14	11	29	5	6	2
Florida	2,906	2,244	3,613	3,519	2,480	2,983	1,490
Georgia	2,636	2,520	2,710	2,694	2,889	3,017	1,653
Hawaii	0	1	6	2	7	0	3
Idaho	730	817	920	978	935	1,135	525
Illinois	1,937	2,082	2,453	2,578	2,658	3,125	1,425
Indiana	1,191	1,197	1,541	1,614	1,793	1,893	933
Iowa	331	431	598	692	787	995	528
Kansas	327	384	474	490	741	914	537
Kentucky	1,368	1,452	1,603	1,849	1,990	2,405	1,407
Louisiana	271	187	223	211	135	173	63
Maine	197	203	350	388	425	607	254
Maryland	1,283	1,239	1,242	1,227	1,508	1,653	960
Massachusetts	1,548	1,541	1,829	1,941	1,688	1,734	942
Michigan	2,588	3,594	4,651	4,006	3,012	4,258	2,253
Minnesota	1,841	1,738	2,214	2,232	2,291	2,635	1,428
Mississippi	2	8	3	7	15	13	6
Missouri	941	1,065	1,268	1,392	1,431	2,072	1,099

<sup>20</sup> Breakdowns of state numbers by refugee nationality are available for FY2017 from the Department of State's Refugee Processing Center at <http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/>.

State	FY2011	FY2012	FY2013	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017
Montana	0	1	0	0	0	27	70
Nebraska	738	764	997	1,076	1,200	1,441	1,018
Nevada	325	470	563	569	610	753	410
New Hampshire	517	363	379	345	446	515	290
New Jersey	383	279	443	363	314	536	327
New Mexico	155	189	293	163	207	342	139
New York	3,529	3,528	3,965	4,082	4,052	5,026	2,646
North Carolina	2,128	2,110	2,377	2,443	2,475	3,342	1,657
North Dakota	362	555	456	582	497	540	327
Ohio	1,691	2,245	2,788	2,815	2,989	4,194	2,324
Oklahoma	273	299	300	389	479	534	232
Oregon	763	695	875	1,019	1,029	1,293	819
Pennsylvania	2,972	2,809	2,507	2,739	2,764	3,219	1,778
Puerto Rico	0	0	3	2	0	0	0
Rhode Island	157	130	171	188	185	337	168
South Carolina	142	135	148	121	226	350	217
South Dakota	490	646	533	523	484	426	270
Tennessee	1,241	1,236	1,557	1,467	1,530	1,959	918
Texas	5,636	5,923	7,475	7,214	7,479	7,802	4,209
Utah	838	942	1,189	1,085	1,109	1,192	644
Vermont	361	350	322	317	312	386	195
Virginia	1,333	1,341	1,472	1,310	1,312	1,471	871
Washington	2,137	2,165	2,414	2,483	2,625	3,233	2,412
West Virginia	9	19	25	28	31	25	12
Wisconsin	760	785	946	1,132	1,415	1,691	822
Wyoming	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>56,424</b>	<b>58,238</b>	<b>69,926</b>	<b>69,987</b>	<b>69,933</b>	<b>84,994</b>	<b>46,403</b>

**Source:** U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.

**Note:** FY2017 data are for October 1, 2016, through May 31, 2017.

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