

U.S. Refugee Resettlement & IRIS Family Placement 101

How do people become refugees?

Refugees are men, women, and children who've had to flee their home countries due to persecution or violence. After crossing a border into a neighboring country, they seek international protection by applying for refugee status, usually through the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR.) They must demonstrate that it is unsafe for them to return to their home countries, where they have a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of race, nationality, religious belief, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

The global refugee crisis

There are 25.4 million refugees in the world today, over half of whom are minors. The vast majority try to make ends meet in the cities and towns of the countries to which they've fled, or in refugee camps. UNHCR refers the most vulnerable refugees to one of the countries that offers permanent resettlement, which includes the U.S., Canada, Australia, and many European countries. A UNHCR referral to one of these countries makes a refugee eligible to apply for resettlement to that country. Less than 1% of refugees get resettled to a country where they can rebuild their lives in safety.

Refugee Resettlement to the U.S.

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) has the most stringent vetting process of any resettling country in the world. It involves multiple background checks, five national security agencies, and in-person interviews with Department of Homeland Security personnel. It can take more than two years.

When the security screening process and medical clearances are almost complete, the State Department allocates refugees who are about to be approved to come to the U.S. to one of nine Voluntary Agencies (VOLAGs) that facilitate initial resettlement services. VOLAGs serve as liaisons between the State Department and local resettlement agencies like IRIS. Episcopal Migration Ministries (EMM) is the VOLAG that oversees resettlement through IRIS.

What factors determine where in the U.S. a refugee family will resettle?

Refugees who are near the end of their screening process overseas are asked if they have any relatives or friends living in the U.S. If they do, they are allocated to the local resettlement agency that is closest to their friends or relatives (known as a U.S. ties.) If they do not, then they are usually allocated to a local resettlement agency in an area where there is a community from their country.

IRIS Refugee Family Placement

When IRIS receives an arrival notice for a refugee family, the Director of Case Management assesses whether this particular family would be a candidate for co-sponsorship. (By the time of an arrival notice, IRIS will have basic information about the family: country of origin, family size and composition, basic medical information, languages spoken, and levels of education. Based on these factors, IRIS decides if the family will be placed with a co-sponsorship group, or if the IRIS staff will provide resettlement services to them in New Haven.) If a family is identified to be a candidate for co-sponsorship, then the Co-sponsorship team confers to decide which greenlit group would be a good match for this family. Several factors go into this decision: interpreter capacities, location, availability of apartments that would accommodate the family size. (E.g., Large families are more likely to be placed with co-sponsors who live in areas where there are affordable 3-4 BR apartments.)

How does a Congolese family get resettled from a Tanzania camp to a town near you?

To better help you understand the U.S. refugee allocation process and the way IRIS makes family placements, we offer the following hypothetical example: After living in a refugee camp in Tanzania for five years, a Congolese family of nine is finally approved for resettlement to the U.S. The State Department allocates them to EMM. The family is asked if they have any relatives or friends living in the U.S. They say yes, we have a cousin living in Middletown, CT. (Friends or relatives like this cousin living in Middletown are called U.S. ties.) EMM knows that their refugee resettlement affiliate IRIS is close to Middletown. EMM requests that IRIS assure the case, meaning that IRIS agrees to provide the family with resettlement services. IRIS says yes.

IRIS contacts the family's U.S. tie (the cousin in Middletown) and asks if he wants to be involved in this family's resettlement. The cousin says yes, and he wants them to live in Middletown.

Two months later, IRIS receives an arrival notice for that case: Congolese family of nine, slated to arrive in ten days. All family members speak Swahili. The mom speaks some French. No major medical issues. IRIS determines that this family is a good candidate for co-sponsorship. The Co-sponsorship Team reviews the applications and greenlight forms for three groups that are ready to resettle a family. IRIS decides to offer the co-sponsorship to a group based in East Haddam, for the following reasons: Their application indicates that they've are prepared to help a family resettle to Middletown, the sustainable community that is closest to East Haddam. They've been able to find 4-BR apartments in Middletown for \$1300 or less. They have access to Swahili interpreters.

IRIS makes the offer of Co-sponsorship to the East Haddam group, and the group enthusiastically accepts. On arrival day, staff from the International Office of Migration (IOM) meets the family at JFK, escorts them through passport control and customs before being brought into the arrival hall. IOM has contracted a shuttle van to drive the family to their final destination, the IRIS office in New Haven, where two members of the East Haddam group first meets them and takes them to their new home in Middletown.