



Reshaping Refuge: The New Era of United States Refugee Admissions

Introduction

One of the consequential areas of policy change for the second Trump administration has been the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). The USRAP is a longstanding humanitarian mechanism that the executive branch uses to resettle refugees into the United States. Under federal [law](#), executive branch officials are charged with (1) reviewing the global refugee situation, (2) projecting the extent of U.S. participation in resettlement for the next fiscal year, and (3) justifying these findings with humanitarian reasoning. The USRAP has been a largely successful program for nearly 45 years, and the U.S. has been seen as a world leader in refugee resettlement, connecting communities, governments, and refugees since the [Refugee Act of 1980](#). However, major changes to the USRAP under the current administration have slowed refugee admissions to a trickle and often blocked those with the most need of resettlement from obtaining protection.

The Refugee Act of 1980 was an enormous step forward in providing efficient, uniform, orderly, and safe refugee resettlement across the United States. This bipartisan piece of legislation, which passed the Senate [unanimously](#), rectified a previously chaotic and inconsistent refugee admissions program. Prior to this bill, the Ford and Carter administrations admitted over [300,000](#) Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees into the United States between 1975 and 1979. These refugees having fled the political turmoil that followed the Vietnam War, faced an uncertain future in the United States. The absence of coordinating legislation and a legal framework on refugee issues culminated in [inequalities](#) across refugee resettlement populations, as communities and supporting NGOs possessed limited resources. Existing law, which was highly impacted by Cold War politics, often meant that individuals from communist countries had preferential treatment. The Refugee Act of 1980 overcame many of these issues, officially aligning the definition of a “refugee” in the United States with United Nations protocols and establishing the USRAP’s legal framework of consistent vetting and uniform resettlement benefits. The bill helped bring about fair and seamless integration across all populations, creating a program that emphasized [early employment](#) to promote [economic self-sufficiency](#). As a result of the Refugee Act of 1980, the USRAP resettled more than [3 million](#) people between 1980 and 2025, in line with American ideals of freedom, liberty, work, and hospitality.

The [suspension](#) of the USRAP in January of 2025 and [subsequent](#) administrative actions negatively impacting refugees throughout 2025 and [early 2026](#) fundamentally [redefined](#) the

refugee admissions program. This explainer examines these developments to explore how these changes are impacting refugee resettlement in the United States.

What is the current status of the USRAP?

One of President Trump's first acts in office was an executive order [suspending](#) the USRAP and terminating the [Welcome Corps](#), which connected refugees to private sponsorship groups. This, in effect, prevented the admission of [thousands of refugees](#) into the United States who had already been vetted. The Trump administration's argument that integrating refugees is currently "detrimental to the interests of the United States" comes after a decade of record-high levels of forced global displacements and refugees. Notably, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates there were [122.1 million](#) displaced individuals as of mid-2025, representing a [51.64%](#) rise in individuals requesting refugee status over the past decade. Of these individuals, only a fraction – [2.9 million](#) refugees globally – needed resettlement in 2025. Those refugees identified as needing resettlement are the most vulnerable, with severe protection risks or urgent medical conditions that cannot be met in the country of current refuge. In the midst of this humanitarian crisis, the U.S. is turning away from the world stage and shutting down its help in resettling these refugees, including providing assistance to them in other countries, which means they will be inclined to consider other means to come to the U.S. especially if they already have family or friends here.

On October 31, 2025, the White House [published the "Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2026"](#) (PD) in the Federal Register. The PD set the refugee ceiling at 7,500 refugees, the lowest in the history of the U.S. refugee program and prompted congressional Democrats to [complain](#) that the administration did not meet statutory requirements to [consult with Congress](#) prior to signing the PD. The administration also [announced](#) it would be allocating the bulk of the refugee slots to white Afrikaners from South Africa. The announcements followed [reports of additional changes](#) under consideration that would emphasize assimilation above protecting those in the most immediate danger, and prioritize Europeans who have been purportedly "targeted for peaceful expression of views such as opposition to mass migration or support for 'populist' political parties." These changes, along with the ongoing halt to resettlement and additional steps to [reopen and review](#) the status of already-resettled refugees (and in some cases, [arrest and detain](#) those [resettled refugees](#)), have dramatically reshaped the foundation of America's forty-five-year-old refugee admissions program.

The administration's prioritization of Afrikaners for resettlement has raised eyebrows. Despite not being designated as a group warranting refugee status by UNHCR, Afrikaners were identified as the primary group to be included in the 7,500 FY2026 ceiling. The PD also mentions "other victims of illegal or unjust discrimination in their respective homelands" as populations of interest but shifts away from the program's historic focus that prioritized refugees of urgent humanitarian concern. Notably, under the PD, [refugees](#) who previously received conditional approval for resettlement are no longer being resettled, even as the resettlement of Afrikaners proceeds.

How have refugee population priorities changed?

In a major shift, the Trump administration has prioritized assimilation and various idiosyncratic factors, sidestepping the traditional resettlement model that focused on prioritizing those facing the greatest dangers and in the greatest need for resettlement.

The USRAP's traditional refugee resettlement model classifies individuals applying for refugee status and resettlement in the United States under prioritized [processing categories](#) – “Priority 1” (P-1) to “Priority 4” (P-4). These processing categories encompass the urgency of the individual's resettlement: P-1 are individual referrals, P-2 are groups of special humanitarian concern, P-3 are family reunification cases, and P-4 are private sponsor referrals. Until the USRAP's suspension in 2025, most of the refugees resettled in the United States were classified as P-1. The majority of these individuals had undergone UNHCR [vetting](#) to comply with international law before being vetted again by Resettlement Support Centers (RSCs) located abroad and by United States Citizenship and Immigration Services' (USCIS) officers. Utilizing UNHCR vetting helped expedite double-vetting and approval under the USRAP. At the same time, P-1 refugees, who tend to face particularly acute dangers, had been prioritized due to humanitarian concerns.

In early 2025, the second Trump administration departed from the existing [UNHCR](#) framework to resettle refugees, [excluding](#) the international agency from its traditional refugee vetting role and [significantly cutting U.S. funding](#) to it. As noted above, in May 2025, the Trump administration began a new [Refugee Admissions Program](#) to help resettle the white Afrikaner minority from South Africa into the United States. While at first glance the program, as well as [the reported plans](#) to refocus resettlement efforts on English speakers and European immigration skeptics, appeared to be a possible reopening for wider refugee resettlement, it deviated from the traditional USRAP, not prioritizing the highest risk refugees nor those with UNHCR refugee status. Instead, Afrikaner resettlement bypassed the UNHCR, relying on [vetting and processing](#) by the Department of State, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and RSCs after individuals completed an online Statement of Interest form.

Moreover, reports on this resettlement program highlight that the main refugee-determining factor is being “a member of a [racial minority](#),” in this case, Afrikaners who allegedly are being persecuted by the post-apartheid government. [Experts have disputed](#) the notion that Afrikaners face a heightened risk of violence or persecution, with crime statistics suggesting they are not more likely to be crime victims than non-white South Africans.

Combined with the enactment of a travel ban and other limits on refugee resettlement detailed above, the administration's refugee policy shifted toward giving preference to specific [nationalities](#), namely higher-income and predominantly [Western and Northern Europeans](#) and/or populations descended from such groups. These shifts are consistent with remarks from President Trump on the role of immigration and culture [in the U.S.](#) and [abroad](#), as well as his stated desire during his campaign for his second term to prioritize immigration from “[nice](#)” countries, including European nations like Denmark, Switzerland, and Norway, while [lamenting](#) migration from Latin America and the Middle East. These comments echo Trump's well-publicized, 2018 remarks [disparaging](#) the protection of migrants from certain countries, his

2024 remarks about [Haitians](#), and his 2025 remarks about [Somalians](#). Some [analysts](#) have perceived this focus on assimilation as a means to “advance political and racialized priorities” in the name of refugees who would most readily assimilate.

What has been happening in refugee resettlement litigation?

Beyond reshaping the traditional selection and vetting model, the Trump administration is facing litigation over the pause in refugee resettlement. Notably, several resettlement agencies and individual plaintiffs brought a class action lawsuit ([Pacito v. Trump](#)) to challenge the constitutionality of the executive order suspending the USRAP. In this case, plaintiffs [aimed](#) to resettle the 12,000 refugees who had “arranged and confirmable travel plans” before January 20 and were stuck in limbo as they continued to face danger. At the time of publication of this explainer in February 2026, this litigation had not yet been resolved.

The [Pacito litigation](#) has been marked by the plaintiffs repeatedly winning relief at the district court level, only to have that relief scaled back by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and subsequent Trump administration actions. Shortly after plaintiffs filed suit in 2025, a federal court [issued](#) a preliminary injunction in the plaintiffs’ favor, mandating the resettlement of the 12,000 vetted refugees. But the Trump administration successfully appealed the preliminary injunction to the Ninth Circuit, which stayed the district court ruling, preventing immediate action on the resettlement of the impacted 12,000 refugees.

Subsequently, the Ninth Circuit court [clarified](#) that injunctive relief should only be provided “on a case-by-case basis” only “to individuals with a strong reliance interest arising prior to January 20, 2025,” representing only a “limited carveout from” its stay, with this exception “interpreted narrowly.”

In response to the Ninth Circuit, on May 15, the district court [rescinded](#) its prior compliance framework for the class of 12,000 refugees and limited the case’s initial resettlement to a subclass of 160 vetted individuals possessing a strong reliance interest prior to January 20, 2025. Consistent with the Ninth Circuit criteria, the district court ordered the Trump administration to “[immediately](#)” resettle the subclass of 160 “[injunction-protected](#)” refugees and then offer [case-by-case](#) determinations for the broader class of 12,000 refugees considered for resettlement.

Shortly thereafter, on June 4, the Trump administration issued a [travel ban](#) that [barred or severely limited](#) travel by nationals from 18 countries, purportedly to protect the United States from terrorism-related and public safety risks. The ban effectively barred approximately [two-thirds](#) of the 160-person subclass from entering the United States.

The district court subsequently [rejected](#) the travel ban’s applicability to excluded members from the 160-person subclass and [continued to consider](#) protections for additional subclasses of refugees.

On March 5, 2026, the Ninth Circuit issued an [opinion](#) allowing for the indefinite ban on refugees to remain in place. The court held that Congress's "sweeping grant of power to the

President" enabled the Trump administration to suspend the entry of vetted and conditionally approved refugees, meaning that the plaintiffs were unlikely to succeed on the merits of their challenges to the ban. In so doing, the court "recognized the enormous practical implications of this decision," namely that "over one hundred thousand vetted and conditionally approved refugees" will now face being "turned away on the tarmac," but declined to substitute its judgment of the wisdom of that policy for those of the political branches.

However, the Ninth Circuit affirmed the district court's injunctive relief requiring the federal government to reinstate cooperative agreements to provide domestic resettlement services to refugees already admitted to the U.S., ruling that the plaintiffs were likely to succeed in showing the administration unlawfully terminated those agreements.

The Ninth Circuit court decision is not the end of the *Pacito v. Trump* case. A bench trial date of September 8, 2026 has been set by the district court along with various discovery deadlines and disclosure dates. As of the time of publication of this explainer, the *Pacito* litigation remains ongoing with repeated efforts by the federal government [to restrict the resettlement](#) of these individuals.

How have the refugee resettlement agencies been impacted?

Another key shift has been the administration's sidelining of established refugee resettlement agencies. These agencies often represent large nationwide networks and constituencies that can be activated to assist in the resettlement and integration process. By filing suit in *Pacito v. Trump*, key resettlement agencies that supported the USRAP sought to resume their refugee and resettlement support services. In aggressively contesting the litigation and issuing an ongoing series of new refugee and resettlement restrictions, the administration has indicated that it no longer seeks to maintain those relationships nor reinstate the services those agencies provided to newly arriving refugees.

Notably, in February 2025, the Trump administration cancelled all [federal funding](#) for resettlement agency partners. Court [records](#) indicate that the administration has been [exploring proposals](#) for "a new resettlement agency" [while severing relations](#) with most previous providers. At the same time, [funding cuts](#) and [prioritization of Afrikaner resettlement](#) have [pushed](#) two resettlement agencies, the [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops \(USCCB\)](#) and the [Episcopal Migration Ministries \(EMM\)](#), out of the resettlement space.

As the administration continues to move away from traditional resettlement partners, it may [refashion](#) the program to have only one or two contractual resettlement agencies provide resettlement services. A shift to reduce the number of resettlement agencies [would allow](#) the administration to exert more direct control over the resettlement process. This, along with other shifts, also suggests a movement away from the previous refugee resettlement model, which placed a strong emphasis on [cooperative engagement and dialogue](#). [Critics assert](#) that these changes are likely to narrow the populations granted resettlement, undermine private sponsorship programs, weaken refugee advocacy, and limit community involvement in the resettlement process. With all of these changes impacting the USRAP and the refugee suspension entering its second year, the remaining resettlement agencies face major strains as their resettlement infrastructures continue to be dismantled.

What has been the impact of State Department layoffs and reorganization?

A string of layoffs at the U.S. Department of State (DOS) in 2025 hints at additional curtailment of humanitarian-focused refugee resettlement. Layoffs of more than [1,300](#) employees, including more than 1,100 civil servants and nearly 250 foreign service officers, deeply cut staff focused on international human rights and migration issues. Many of the impacted civil servants comprised the backbone of the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), which saw its [webpage](#) archived after the layoffs. The layoffs mean that refugees abroad – including those already cleared for resettlement – will see [support](#) decreased, including [access](#) to the resettlement process as well as to basic necessities like safe drinking [water, food, and emergency health care](#).

Following the DOS layoffs, the Department of Health & Human Services' (HHS) [Office of Refugee Resettlement](#) (ORR) [took on](#) the initial domestic resettlement responsibilities that previously belonged to DOS, notably overseeing the Reception and Placement ([R&P](#)) program. The R&P program grants designate federal funds to resettlement agencies, helping to [fiscally](#) support refugees through the first three months (90 days) of their resettlement.

ORR's traditional responsibilities encompassed the majority of the longer-term integration processes such as medical screening, trauma counseling, school enrollment for children, daycare, and job development for refugees. These services are vital for resettled individuals to secure citizenship pathways, understand cultural norms, and gain fiscal self-sufficiency in their new communities.

DOS's role in the initial resettlement program helped leverage DOS's influence and advance the USRAP, linking domestic resettlement to DOS's role in providing assistance to refugees overseas, and afforded the U.S. with corresponding [foreign policy leverage](#). In contrast, because ORR has traditionally focused on providing longer-term assistance and humanitarian support for resettled refugees domestically, and does not have these overseas functions, it will not be able to leverage the initial resettlement program as DOS did.

ORR could face further challenges if it is subject to further layoffs, funding cuts, or staffing reassignments, even as it assumes new initial refugee resettlement responsibilities from DOS. As the Trump administration prioritizes resettlement to individuals with high assimilation probabilities, many of ORR's [programs](#), like English language training, trauma support, and community mentoring through collaborative agencies, could be scaled down. There are concerns that the [Matching Grant](#), [Refugee Medical Assistance](#), [Preferred Communities](#), and other programs could face cuts or termination. Moreover, as the administration moves away from USRAP's established processes, refugees resettled by the administration could see their access to integration and other benefits restricted. For example, the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) published by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) on November 19, 2025, entitled "[Public Charge Ground of Inadmissibility](#)" broadens the understanding of "[public charge](#)" and threatens to dissuade certain resettled refugee populations from accessing benefits to which they are eligible.

Conclusion

For more than four decades, the United States' commitment to refugee resettlement has prioritized individuals with the greatest need of protection. The Trump administration's overhaul of the refugee program represents a major change, shifting away from those with the greatest humanitarian need, instead prioritizing those that the executive branch deems the easiest to integrate –Europeans, Afrikaners, and other higher-income, English-speaking populations. This change will negatively impact many refugees coming from the Middle East, Latin America, and other parts of Africa and is likely to lead to a homogenization of the refugee population selected for resettlement.

In sidelining UNHCR and reducing the involvement of the domestic resettlement agencies, the administration not only increases the vulnerability of refugees worldwide but also risks undermining the global influence of the United States in humanitarian immigration. In limiting refugee admissions and community involvement in the refugee resettlement process, crucial local networks that provide support and advocate on behalf of refugees will also be diminished, potentially sowing seeds of misunderstanding and mistrust toward refugees at the local level.

The large-scale reduction in refugee admissions, alongside cuts to DOS staffing and international assistance, and the displacement of the initial resettlement program, represent a reversal of long-term U.S. commitments to refugee resettlement. Taken as a whole, the Trump administration's changes to the USRAP will only further negatively impact the support offered to refugees, both those overseas and those fortunate enough to be resettled.

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