

Impact of COVID for Refugees and Asylum Seekers



Welcome the stranger.
Protect the refugee.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every facet of our lives. For refugees and asylum seekers, COVID-19 has led to greater instability and vulnerability, both inside and outside of the United States. Both in the U.S. and internationally, refugees and asylum seekers are at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 due to overcrowded living conditions and lack of access to health care. Additionally, without permanent immigration status, refugees and asylum seekers are withheld from economic safety nets, and thus particularly susceptible to economic loss and hardship. So far, policies to protect the U.S. from COVID-19 have largely focused on closing the doors to displaced persons and have excluded many refugees and asylum seekers already in the U.S. from economic and health protections.

As the world grapples with COVID-19, we cannot turn our back on vulnerable people in search of safety. The U.S. response to this pandemic must ensure that refugees and asylum seekers have their rights protected and must include them in policy discussions. Even in times of uncertainty, U.S. commitments to international laws regarding protection are still in place and must be upheld.

COVID Impacts Refugees Everywhere

Refugees are significantly impacted by COVID-19. In the U.S., many refugees are essential workers or otherwise on the frontline of the pandemic response, including in the healthcare field, as part of the supply chain, and as retail service employees. For countless others, COVID-19 related closures have left them without income. While Congress has enacted legislation to respond to the growing economic and health needs during this time, many refugees are left out and unable to receive cash payments, unemployment benefits, and other desperately-needed relief. Additionally, due to a temporary pause on resettlement to the U.S., refugees who have been approved for travel will be waiting indefinitely and may see their travel documents expire.

COVID Leads to Additional Restrictions on Access to Asylum

In response to the spread of COVID-19, the administration has implemented further policies that block access to asylum in the United States. Similar to existing policies, such as the Migrant Protection Protocols (commonly referred to as 'Remain in Mexico'), these actions are in opposition to our country's history as a safe haven for individuals seeking safety and violate long-standing U.S. asylum laws and protections. In March, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued an order that allowed for the expulsion of asylum seekers from the United States without the formal legal processing normally required. This order has effectively eliminated access to asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border. In one month, DHS blocked and expelled more than 21,000 asylum seekers at the southern U.S. border under this order.

Returning thousands of asylum seekers to Mexico will only exacerbate public health outcomes as many migrants there already face unsafe and unsanitary conditions including a lack of access to safe shelter, medical care, clean water, and food. Additionally, asylum seekers in Mexico are repeatedly targets of violence and thousands have been victims of crime after being forced to wait there under the Migrant Protection Protocols.

The United States has the moral and legal obligation to ensure access to asylum, which is a fundamental human right. Ending humanitarian protection at the border does not make the United States any safer, it only puts asylum seekers at grave risk, and worsens a humanitarian crisis which was already causing mass suffering. All asylum seekers should be safely and fairly processed at the border using health protections outlined by public health experts and should not be forced into dangerous situations where they will be unable to protect themselves and their families from disease.

Talking Points

- COVID-19 is now present in every country in the world, having infected more than 4 million people. The world's 71 million refugees and displaced people, who often live hand-to-mouth and survive on the informal labor market, are among the most vulnerable to the threat of the coronavirus.
- Refugee resettlement to the U.S. is temporarily suspended with limited exceptions only in emergency situations. This means many refugees who have been approved to come to the United States will see their visas, entry permits, and other travel documents expire. The Department of State must automatically extend the validity periods of those documents.
- Because of instability, overcrowded living conditions, lack of access to clean water, and lack of access to healthcare, refugees and asylum seekers around the world are especially vulnerable to contracting COVID-19.
- Refugees and asylum seekers are directly impacted as food, shelter, and medical care become harder to access. Many are facing job losses, food shortages, increased vulnerability to gender-based violence, and social isolation as the economic and social impacts of COVID-19 ripple through communities.
- Refugees and asylum seekers are also particularly likely to be left out of public health spaces as our nations turn inward in efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19.
- Refugees across America know the importance of coming together in crisis. Across the country, refugees are part of the front-line response to this crisis - as nurses, eldercare

workers, grocery store owners, and maintenance staff. We welcomed them, and now they are giving back as our neighbors and community members. We are all in this together.

- Instead of blocking people seeking humanitarian protection, asylum seekers should be allowed into the United States to shelter with family, as is permitted under existing legal authority, pending their immigration court proceedings. The human rights and safety of asylum seekers must not be compromised.

Policy Asks

- Voice support for the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in any COVID-19 related relief efforts including through the expansion of cash payments and unemployment benefits and ensuring access to testing and treatment for COVID-19.
- Call for refugee resettlement in the U.S. to resume as soon as it is safe for refugees to travel and settle in their new homes. Extend the visa validity period for refugees whose travel was blocked due to COVID-19 to ensure that there are no further delays for them.
- Rescind the CDC order that allows the U.S. to expel asylum seekers with no legal processing.
- Instead of blocking humanitarian protection at the border, urge DHS to employ effective and humane policies that uphold the right to asylum, while implementing measures recommended by public health experts to safeguard asylum seekers, CBP personnel, and public health.