



US Touts Public-Private Partnership to Assist Refugees

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Seeking to reinvigorate America's historic role as a destination for refugees, the Biden administration this week announced a sponsorship initiative to boost and facilitate private sector involvement in supporting recently arrived refugees.

The effort is initially focused on helping newcomers from Afghanistan but is expected to serve as a model for assisting other refugee groups in the future as Washington ramps up refugee admissions after years of drastic cuts imposed by the former Trump administration.

The State Department announced a partnership with more than 250 nonprofit groups that have banded together to help Afghan families resettle in the U.S. under the umbrella [Welcome.US](#).

The site serves as a hub for donations, volunteer efforts and stories of how ordinary Americans are making a difference in the lives of uprooted Afghan families. Former Presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, as well as a host of celebrities, have lent support to the initiative.

"The generosity displayed by the American people in welcoming newly arrived Afghans ... has been nothing short of remarkable and is a clear demonstration of our values as a nation of immigrants that welcomes refugees and vulnerable populations from across the world," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement.

For decades, the federal government has worked with U.S. refugee resettlement agencies to help new arrivals enroll in language training and employment services, register children in schools, apply for Social Security cards and perform other basic tasks.

The new partnership, which comes amid fierce criticism of the administration's handling of evacuations from Afghanistan during and after the pullout of U.S. forces, aims to greatly augment the system and "catalyze support from Americans from all walks of life to support newly arriving Afghans," according to the State Department.

According to a recent poll, 90 percent of Democrats said Americans should welcome Afghans, and 76 percent of Republicans support admitting refugees who aided the U.S. military.

More can be done

Many immigrant advocates and analysts welcomed the initiative, but some said even more could be done.

David Bier, immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, said in an email to VOA that although it was “great” the Biden administration was acknowledging the private sector's willingness to accept refugees, he urged the government to allow private individuals and organizations to sponsor refugees outside the existing publicly funded refugee caps.

“Americans' ability to accept refugees should not be dependent on the U.S. government's willingness to fund it and raise caps as it is now,” Bier said.

The number of refugees accepted into the U.S. each year is set by the president in consultation with Congress. As a presidential candidate, Joe Biden promised to admit up to 125,000 refugees annually, up from the cap of 15,000 set in the final year of former President Donald Trump's administration. Once in office, Biden initially retained Trump’s lower cap but then raised it to 62,500 amid an outcry from within his own Democratic Party.

So far in fiscal 2021, which ends September 30, the U.S. has admitted fewer than 7,000 refugees, not including Afghans.

Scrambling to help new arrivals

Although private citizens are not involved in the immigration cases of resettling refugees, U.S. officials hope the private sector’s collection and sharing of resources to assist new arrivals will alleviate burdens on resettlement organizations that often scramble to arrange housing and other basic necessities for refugees.

“In the last few weeks, we served more than 100 people,” said Krish O’Mara Vignarajah, chief executive of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, a resettlement agency, speaking with reporters. “Some are coming with little more than a backpack. We know the importance of an orderly system that processes and prepares these new Afghan arrivals, helping them make informed decisions on where they ultimately want to resettle.”

Afghans who were evacuated to the U.S. without immigrant visas are being legally designated as “parolees” and not technically as refugees. That distinction, under current U.S. law, means they have a complex immigration road ahead of them.

Though they are temporarily protected from deportation and are permitted to apply for work authorization, being paroled into the country does not confer immigration status, grant access to public benefits or constitute a path to U.S. citizenship.

Immigrant advocates have urged Congress to pass legislation that would protect those under parole designation and allow them to apply for permanent residence.

Others have arrived under the Special Immigrant Visa program, which automatically places them on a path to permanent residency followed by U.S. citizenship, a process that can take more than five years.

As of September 14, 64,000 evacuees from Afghanistan had arrived in the United States, joining roughly 132,000 Afghan immigrants in the country, most of whom arrived in the last decade.

Immigrant advocates say new arrivals from Afghanistan will greatly benefit from the support system provided by Welcome.US as, initially, they will have lower incomes than America's overall foreign and native-born populations.