

What the US Does to Screen Refugees—And How Many Are Moving to Your State

Since Friday's brutal terrorist attacks in Paris, policymakers are calling for the process refugees go through to resettle in the United States to be halted, at least temporarily.

But what is the process those refugees must go through to gain entrance into the country?

Since Sept. 11, 2001, the United States has resettled 748,000 refugees, according to the Migration Policy Institute. Over the course of the last 14 years, the group found, just three were arrested for planning terrorist activity. However, no refugees living in the United States have been successful in carrying out an attack on U.S. soil.

The United States has accepted roughly 70,000 refugees over the last few years. But beginning Oct. 1, Secretary of State John Kerry announced that the U.S. would accept 85,000 refugees in 2016, with at least 10,000 coming from Syria. By 2017, the Department of State announced that the number of refugees entering the country would increase to 100,000.

Since 2011, fewer than 2,000 Syrian refugees have resettled in the United States.

However, political figures have turned their attention to the U.S. refugee program in the wake of Friday's terror attacks in Paris that left more than 129 dead and 350 injured. Following the attacks, political leaders at both the state and federal level are calling for the government to halt the resettlement of Syrian refugees following reports that one of the terrorists involved may have entered France as a refugee.

Since the attacks last week, governors representing 30 states announced opposition to the Obama administration's policies allowing Syrian refugees to seek safe haven in the U.S. Additionally, lawmakers on Capitol Hill have begun to draft legislation addressing how the U.S. will handle Syrian refugees—if at all.



A number of groups that work with refugees when they arrive in the U.S., though, have said that proposals to stop the refugee program would leave Syrian refugees in grave danger.

“To close the door on resettling Syrian refugees would be nothing less than signing a death warrant for tens of thousands of refugees fleeing for their lives,” Linda Hartke, president of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, said Tuesday during a conference call with reporters.

The History of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program

Officially called the United States Refugee Admission Program, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, a branch of the Department of Homeland Security, oversees the process refugees seeking to come to the U.S. go through. However, a number of intelligence agencies, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of State all have a hand in the process.

Refugee programs were created to assist those “persecuted or have a credible fear of persecution based on their religion, race, political beliefs, or membership in a social group.”

In a conference call with reporters, Lavinia Limon, president of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, said the United States' history with assisting refugees can be traced back to 1975, when President Gerald Ford called on the U.S. to accept more than 137,000 Vietnamese refugees fleeing communism.

Over that 40-year span, the United States has accepted more than 3 million refugees, who live in all 50 states.

Those seeking to come to the United States through the refugee program have always had to undergo security checks. However, the Refugee Admission Program has undergone a series of changes since Sept. 11, 2001, to enhance security protocols, Limon said.

Directly after the Sept. 11 terror attacks, the George W. Bush administration temporarily halted the Refugee Admissions Program for seven months to review it. Then, at the request of the president, it went back into effect with additional security measures, Limon said.

Five years ago, the program went through another review of its security protocols, she told reporters.

“It’s crucial to us that we have a secure program where people can be contributing to the community so that we can live in those communities ourselves,” Limon said of the refugee process and security protocols.

“We’re asking, what type of background checks are you actually going through? How long is it taking? And can that information be supplied to local state officials, so in case something happens we at least have some record of where these people are within our states,” Republican North Carolina Gov. Pat McCrory said in an interview with Fox News Monday. “And right now, there is almost no coordination or communications between the state and the federal officials on this issue.”

North Carolina is one of the states opposing the resettlement of Syrian refugees.

How the Refugee Admission Program Works

For refugees living abroad who seek to come to the United States, the resettlement process—the “selection and transfer”

of refugees—can take between 18 and 24 months, according to the Department of State.

That process begins first with a number of institutions—primarily the United Nations High Commission for Refugees—around the world that field requests from refugees looking to move to the United States and refer refugees to the Refugee Admissions Program.

Once a refugee is referred to the federal government's program, the official screening process begins, according to the Department of State.

Both Hartke and Limon agreed that the “minute” details of the security screening process are not disclosed by the government to the public. However, the two women said the government, in conjunction with intelligence agencies, conducts background checks that include an analysis of biographical and biometric data checked against federal and international databases.

Once a refugee's information has been vetted against data from the intelligence community, an officer with Citizenship and Immigration Services conducts an in-person interview with the refugee.

If the government approves his application, the refugee then undergoes a medical screening from the Department of Health and Human Services.

Once that process is completed, the federal government works with a number of private-sector voluntary agencies to resettle the refugee in the United States.

For refugees arriving in the United States, voluntary agencies will assist them in getting settled into a new home.

The Department of Homeland Security follows up with refugees in the U.S. when they apply for green cards, Limon said. Such a check typically occurs one year after a refugee arrives in

the U.S., she said. Then databases are checked once more.

Syrian Refugees

During a call with reporters, Limon noted that the government has added an additional layer of review for Syrian refugees' applications, which includes looking at additional actors in the region as well as the "dynamic nature of Syrian issues."

"This has been an iterative process, enhanced over many years, and most recently for Syrian refugees," she said.

Lawmakers on Capitol Hill are debating legislation to halt the flow of Syrian refugees into the United States.

According to The Hill, GOP members in the House are coming together in support of a bill from Rep. Richard Hudson, R-N.C., that would stop the refugee process temporarily until government agencies can verify that those from Iraq and Syria are not a security threat.

"The risks of terrorists slipping undetected into our country is too high," Hudson said in a statement. "ISIS has vowed to exploit the refugee crisis, and it appears they did just that in Paris. I refuse to allow President Obama to open our front door to radical Islamic extremists who are bent on burning down our house."

Despite Hudson's concerns, Kevin Appleby, director of migration policy with the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops, said Syrians, in particular, see enhanced security screenings from the government and have lived peacefully in the U.S. for the last few years.

"With Syrians, you have special scrutiny coming in," he said, "and we have resettled Syrians over the past years with no incidents."