

PRESS RELEASE

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Lack of National Framework to Support Asylees and Asylum Seekers Keeps Them Disconnected from Key Family and Work Support Programs for Which They Are Eligible

WASHINGTON — The labels assigned to humanitarian migrants are based on whether they seek protection from outside the United States (refugees) or from within the country or at its borders (asylum seekers). But even though refugees and asylum seekers are fleeing similar forms of harm and must meet the same persecution standards, the systems in place to support them once they gain protection in the United States are markedly different.

A well-established network of national and local resettlement agencies connects refugees to cash, food and medical assistance, employment services and a range of other supports. While asylees are eligible for many of the same services and benefits, the national mechanisms for linking them to such programs are much weaker, a new Migration Policy Institute (MPI) report notes. In fact, asylees are left to rely on information they can find on the website of the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and an online pamphlet developed by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

The favorable treatment of Afghan and Ukrainian arrivals, who are served through refugee programs, are raising questions about equity for humanitarian migrants, including age-old disparities in access to benefits and services based on whether the individual is a refugee or asylee.

In the absence of a national framework to support asylees, many state and local governments and non-profit organizations have developed hotlines, orientation workshops and other means to inform asylees of the supports available to them. But these efforts, while important stopgaps, are often piecemeal and not sustainable, the MPI analysts argue.

The report, [The Missing Link: Connecting Eligible Asylees and Asylum Seekers with Benefits and Services](#), notes that while refugees become eligible for many benefits and services when they arrive in the United States, many people who receive asylum have already been in the country for a considerable period of time, waiting for their protection cases to be decided.

As the United States has witnessed rising arrivals of unaccompanied children and families over recent years, the asylum caseload has surged. More than 1 million asylum cases were pending as of the end of fiscal year

(FY) 2021. Sixty-two percent of pending cases are stalled in immigration courts, where there is an average wait time of 934 days for adjudication. Asylum seekers must also wait at least six months after applying for protection to obtain a work permit, as a result often having to rely on family, friends or local charities for help. While eligible for far fewer benefits and services than asylees, asylum seekers are generally eligible for emergency medical services, non-cash disaster relief assistance and English language instruction under Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Those in families who meet additional criteria may be eligible for medical, nutritional, early childhood development and financial assistance. Many asylum seekers, however, are not aware of these programs.

“Support with navigating and accessing these programs can have significant bearing on asylum seekers’ ability to provide for their families and contribute to the U.S. communities in which they live, especially as they wait for employment authorization,” the authors write.

The report recommends the government take steps to address structural barriers that prevent many asylees from accessing the benefits and services available to them. USCIS and the Executive Office for Immigration Review, which is the immigration courts system where most asylum cases are decided, should improve how they notify asylees of available benefits and services, including by encouraging collaboration between local immigration judges, asylum offices and state government and resettlement agencies to better disseminate this information in orientation sessions for new asylees.

The authors also recommend that ORR re-establish a national hotline that offers information and referral services to asylees and asylum seekers, and provide technical assistance to help states and non-profit organizations serve more asylees and in ways that are more responsive to their needs.

“Better government mechanisms to connect asylees and asylum seekers to the benefits and services for which they are eligible could help alleviate strains on the schools, diaspora communities and charitable organizations that are typically on the front lines,” said report co-author Essey Workie, who directs MPI’s Human Services Initiative. “They also would support the long-term integration into U.S. society of those granted protection, benefiting not only them but also their families and the communities in which they live.”

The report also sketches current trends in asylum claims and processing, noting that the nearly 413,000 affirmative asylum claims pending with USCIS at the end of FY 2021 represented a level unseen since the mid-1990s—even as new affirmative asylum case filings fell substantially from FY 2017. The defensive asylum caseload in the immigration courts system surged to 669,000 at the end of FY 2021, more than six times the caseload pending in FY 2008.

You can read the report here: www.migrationpolicy.org/research/asylees-asylum-seekers-benefits.

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The Migration Policy Institute is an independent, non-partisan, non-profit think tank in Washington, D.C. dedicated to analysis of the movement of people worldwide. MPI provides analysis, development and evaluation of migration and refugee policies at the local, national and international levels. For more on MPI, please visit www.migrationpolicy.org.

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