

# Welcoming People Seeking Safety: A San Diego Blueprint for Humanitarian Reception



As more people than ever before are displaced around the world, governments and communities have the opportunity—and obligation—to ensure the safe, humane, and sustainable reception of people seeking safety in the United States. Rather than rely on punitive, expensive, and ineffective border policies like [asylum bans](#) or [mass detention](#), humanitarian services that safely and efficiently welcome and process people who have recently arrived already exist in places like San Diego, California.

The [San Diego Rapid Response Network](#) (SDRRN) Migrant Shelter Services, operated by [Jewish Family Service of San Diego](#) (JFSSD), offers a viable and [cost-effective](#) blueprint for governments and communities across the U.S. to safely and efficiently welcome people seeking asylum. This model is especially cost-effective and efficient when compared to [detention and enforcement-based](#) models.

In the past three years, the SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services has served between 3,000 and 7,200 people each month and helped them travel on to their next destinations and reunions with loved ones. The success of this approach means more than 201,000 people in search of protection were spared detention and, instead, experienced a dignified and organized welcome, preparing them to go through the immigration process.

This blueprint for humanitarian reception grew out of the SDRRN when in fall 2018 the [Trump administration ended](#) the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) policy of safe release—the long-held travel protocol to facilitate asylum seekers' ability to safely reach their final destinations. This forced migrants, including families with young children, to fend for themselves after being dropped off by DHS officials at random times and locations on city streets. In response, SDRRN and JFSSD stepped in to provide respite shelter services, which previously did not exist in San Diego.

Over the last five-plus years, JFSSD has adapted and expanded its shelter network and services to serve more than 201,000 people seeking safety. Through a partnership with the University of California (UC) San Diego Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health and Human Longevity Science, services provided include medical screenings and stabilization. As of 2021, with support from the State of California, the SDRRN shelter model has been scaled and expanded through other nongovernmental organization (NGO) respite shelter operators. Continued state and county investment with sustained federal support is necessary to facilitate this model's success.

**SDRRN's reception of people seeking asylum at its respite shelter network serves as a road map for how governments and communities across the U.S. can build upon the experiences and lessons learned from the model in San Diego.**

## How do asylum seekers arrive at the SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services?

People from all over the world—including Latin America, the Caribbean, Ukraine, Russia, Africa, and the Middle East—come to the U.S.-Mexico border in search of protection. After typically waiting for weeks or months in Mexico, some families and individuals secure appointments to enter at a port of entry via the mobile phone app, CBP One. After being processed at the San Ysidro Port of Entry, released from US Border Patrol stations, or enrolled in Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s (ICE) alternatives to detention program, vulnerable migrants arrive at SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services or another local NGO-operated respite shelter. Although many people come through Tijuana, Mexico, and the surrounding area, others are transported to San Diego by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) from other parts of the border via bus or air. This lateral transfer of asylum seekers is carried out in service of CBP’s operational priorities and without consideration of SDRRN or other NGO respite shelter capacity.

JFSSD coordinates with CBP and ICE to facilitate the safe and humane transfer of migrants from government custody to shelter, finding greatest success coordinating with the CBP Office of Field Operations at the San Ysidro Port of Entry. In 2023, US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) began on-site operations at the SDRRN Travel Center to help migrants who entered via a CBP One appointment expedite their work authorization applications. Migrants can receive support submitting their biometrics and other information on the spot from USCIS and the JFSSD legal team, which assists with filing pro se work authorization applications. This facilitates each person’s ability to support themselves more quickly as they await the outcome of their immigration cases.

After long journeys to the US-Mexico border, some families and individuals cannot wait to try to secure CBP One appointments to reach safety. The number of available CBP One appointments each day are far fewer than the demand, and the app continues to be plagued with errors and technical glitches. Whether due to the dangerous conditions in Mexico, lacking a cell phone, or not knowing the few languages CBP One is available in, some people seeking asylum enter between ports of entry. In Southern California, many are held

by Border Patrol in [open-air detention sites](#) without adequate food, water, sanitation, shelter, or medical care.

When there is reduced funding by the state of California, shelters, including the SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services, limit services to the most vulnerable asylum seekers, such as people with medical conditions, pregnant people, LGBTQIA+ people, and older adults. In this scenario, non-vulnerable asylum seekers are being released by DHS to the streets of San Diego without further assistance. Organizations providing humanitarian assistance, including to migrants left on the street, struggle to sustain themselves without more substantial, consistent support from all levels of government.

## Where does someone stay when they’re at SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services? What services do they receive?

First, people arrive to the SDRRN Travel Center. The Travel Center is located in a space leased from the State of California, close to the hotel shelter. It has a children’s area and meals available for people traveling to destinations where they will connect with family, friends, or community support. JFSSD refers a very small percentage of guests without points of contact to support services in San Diego.

Anyone who is not able to travel on the same day is provided shelter at the SDRRN non-congregate shelter or individual hotel rooms, where people generally stay between 24 and 72 hours. At the SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services, staff and volunteers welcome people and provide an initial assessment to identify and triage needs. Simultaneous interpretation by staff is available in 11 languages and via a language line for any other language.

All shelter guests receive food, medical screening, and treatment for urgent medical needs. Throughout their stay they have access to medical services, COVID-19 vaccines, case management services, legal empowerment including “Know Your Rights” presentations, and pro se legal assistance. [UC San Diego Health](#) is on site for medical screenings and stabilization. This partnership has proven critical as [medical needs](#) among arriving migrants have dramatically increased, although its referral rates to local emergency departments remain below 0.5 percent. JFSSD

partners with organizations and donors to provide clothing, including warm clothes for those traveling on to colder regions of the US and religious dress like burkas and hijabs to replace those that Border Patrol [confiscated](#).

JFSSD also works with other organizations to [reunite families](#) who were separated by CBP during processing. In one alarming example, JFSSD had to advocate for the reunification of a pregnant mother with her school-aged daughter after she was hospitalized for contractions. JFSSD continues to provide care to vulnerable individuals and [urge CBP to expedite the processing](#) of people who are pregnant, postpartum, and/or nursing with their families.

Over the past five years, JFSSD has had to change shelter venues seven times due to space, capacity, and funding limitations. An investment from all levels of government for a large congregate shelter site is needed to streamline services and reduce costs.

### **Where do asylum seekers go next?**

Families and individuals are ready to travel once their medical, legal, and support needs are met. More than 98 percent of the people sheltered by JFSSD have a point of contact—such as a family member or friend—in the US outside of San Diego. This makes the coordination of travel central to ensure they reach those points of contact or community support who will help them build stability while pursuing their legal cases.

### **What makes JFSSD's respite sheltering program possible?**

Fundamental to JFSSD's shelter program is its public-private partnership model, relying on a mix of federal funds, support from the State of California, and private philanthropy. JFSSD has used Federal Emergency Management Agency Emergency Food and Shelter Program humanitarian funding to fund much of its respite shelter operations, including paying for buses to bring migrants released from the Office of Field Operations at the Port of Entry to its shelter to support asylum seekers being released by DHS. Today, JFSSD uses [Shelter and Services Program](#) (SSP) funding to support its operations. SSP is the only source of federal government support for shelters receiving migrants after they have been processed.

SSP funds, coupled with resources from the State of California, have been critical to the SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services' success in safely welcoming asylum seekers. However, this funding level has failed to allow for a meaningful and sustainable investment to maintain and grow the infrastructure built in the long term. All levels of government are needed to be part of the solution.

### **How can governments and communities across the U.S. refine and scale the SDRRN/JFSSD model?**

1. The federal government should continue to fund the safe and humane reception of migrants along the southern border through the Shelter and Services Program (SSP). SSP was most recently funded at \$650 million in the "Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024," a cut of almost 20 percent from fiscal year 2023's \$800 million. The federal government should also create additional funds to support states and local communities hosting newcomers while they become self-sufficient. Funds for humanitarian reception should reduce and replace funding for inhumane, expensive, and ineffective immigration detention and surveillance and ultimately build toward more robust, welcoming infrastructure.
2. CBP Office of Field Operations, Border Patrol, and ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations must achieve consistent coordination with respite service providers to ensure the swift, safe processing and release of people seeking protection from immigration custody to shelters or respite centers. DHS transportation coordinators should be appointed to liaise with local service providers.
3. State and local governments should fund, coordinate with, and support service providers and community organizations providing services and support to people seeking safety to ensure the most robust and effective reception of migrants, focused on safe and humane practices. Together, stakeholders can build more sustainable welcoming infrastructure.
4. Welcoming systems should prioritize the deployment of limited reception resources to the most vulnerable people seeking safety, including families, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other individuals with heightened needs such as medical conditions.

5. Welcoming systems should include medical screening and stabilization. Timely and high quality medical services provide immediate humanitarian medical care, protect the other shelter guests and the public by identifying and managing infectious diseases, and greatly reduce the burden on emergency medical services.
6. Communities newly welcoming people seeking asylum should refer to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees' Border Shelter Toolkit and Toolkit on Asylum-Seeker Reception to learn more about [established best practices](#).
7. DHS should prioritize staffing and resources to increase the number of available CBP One appointments that allow families and individuals to enter the United States at ports of entry. Increasing access to asylum at ports of entry would help prevent loss of life and life-threatening injuries from more dangerous routes to safety.

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#### **Jewish Family Service of San Diego**

Founded in 1918, Jewish Family Service (JFSSD) is one of San Diego's most impactful nonprofit agencies – partnering with people of all backgrounds to build stable and dignified lives. JFSSD's immigration work includes operating the San Diego Rapid Response Network (SDRRN) Migrant Shelter Services for respite shelter care for people seeking asylum, pro bono immigration legal services, and refugee resettlement. Together, we create a stronger and healthier community where everyone can thrive. Discover how Jewish Family Service of San Diego is Moving Forward *Together* by visiting [www.jfssd.org](http://www.jfssd.org).

#### **Women's Refugee Commission**

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) improves the lives and protects the rights of women, children, and youth who have been displaced by conflict and crisis. We research their needs, identify solutions, and advocate for programs and policies to strengthen their resilience and drive change in humanitarian practice. Since our founding in 1989, we have been a leading expert on the needs of refugee women, children, and youth and the policies that can protect and empower them.

[www.womensrefugeecommission.org](http://www.womensrefugeecommission.org).

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