

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, especially when compared to [detention and enforcement-based](#) models, [cost-effective](#) blueprint for governments and communities across the U.S. to safely and efficiently welcome people seeking asylum. In the past two years alone, SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services has served between 3,000 and 7,200 people each month and helped them on to their next destinations and reunions with loved ones. The success of this approach means more than 120,000 people in search of protection were spared detention in favor of 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. In response, SDRRN and JFSSD stepped in to provide respite shelter services, which previously did not exist in San Diego.

Over the last four-plus years, JFSSD has adapted and expanded its shelter network and services to serve more than 120,000 people seeking safety. Through a partnership with the University of California (UC) San Diego Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health, services provided include medical screenings and stabilization. As of 2021, with support from the State of California, its shelter model has been scaled and expanded through other nongovernmental organization (NGO) respite shelter operators.

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 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. They arrive at SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services or another local NGO-operated respite shelter after being processed at the San Ysidro Port of Entry, released from U.S. Border Patrol stations, or enrolled in Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) alternatives to detention program. 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 (OFO) at the San Ysidro Port of Entry. JFSSD has used Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP) humanitarian funding to fund much of its respite shelter operations, including paying for buses to bring migrants released from OFO at the Port of Entry to its shelter.

Where does someone stay when they're at SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services?

People generally stay between 24 and 72 hours in SDRRN's non-congregate shelter, which it operates in partnership with the State of California. They receive three meals a day and are screened for COVID-19 and urgent medical needs. Throughout their stay they have access to medical services, COVID-19 vaccines, case management services, Know Your Rights presentations, and legal assistance.

At SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services, staff and volunteers welcome people and provide an initial assessment to identify and triage needs. Simultaneous interpretation is available by staff for Spanish, Haitian Creole, Ukrainian, Russian, and Arabic speakers and via a language line for any other language spoken. [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%. JFSSD partners with organizations and donors to provide clothing, including warm clothes for those traveling on to colder regions of the U.S. and religious dress like burkas and hijabs to replace those that Border Patrol [confiscated](#).

Over the past four years, JFSSD has had to change shelter venues seven times due to space, capacity, and funding limitations.

Where do asylum seekers go next?

More than 98% of the people sheltered by JFSSD have a point of contact—such as a family member or friend—in the U.S. 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. In addition to logistical challenges, people fleeing for their lives usually lack the financial resources to buy plane tickets, and even bus travel is out of reach as routes are often cancelled going farther east than Denver, Colorado.

To add capacity to its overall operations, SDRRN has established a travel center, located in a space leased from the State of California, close to the hotel shelters. The travel center has congregate overnight space, a children's area, and meals available for people flying out 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.

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 EFSP funds, support from the State of California, and private philanthropy. EFSP funds, coupled with resources from the State of California, have been critical to 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.

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

1. The federal government should fund the safe and humane reception of migrants along the Southern border, as well as engage civil society as DHS stands up the new [Shelter and Services grant program](#) established by the [federal spending bill](#) enacted in December 2022. Funds for humanitarian reception should reduce and replace funding for inhumane, expensive, and ineffective immigration detention and [surveillance](#).
2. CBP OFO, Border Patrol and ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations must achieve consistent coordination with respite service providers to ensure the swift, safe release and transportation 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 delivery of safe and humane reception of migrants.
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](#) to learn more about established best practices.

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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 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.

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.