

## SNAPSHOT

### Introduction

People around the world who are forced to flee or fear war, persecution, and harm often seek asylum in safe countries. Those who arrive to the United States need safe places to live while they go through the asylum process.

As part of a multi-city project, the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) recently went to New York City (NYC) and Portland, Maine, to see how these cities are responding to the needs of people seeking asylum or other forms of protection in the US. We saw firsthand that beyond having their immediate basic needs met, people seeking asylum need stability in their new communities and help with navigating the complex and often lengthy asylum process.

Based on our observations and interviews with people seeking asylum and staff of more than 30 organizations working with them, we found that both NYC and Portland offer promising best practices in the reception of those seeking asylum. At the same time, both cities face challenges in meeting the needs of the new arrivals.

What we learned can inform state and local policy and program design in towns and cities around the US where people seeking asylum are arriving, as well as federal policy and funding approaches.

### Support services are a springboard to permanent housing

Finding safe and secure housing plays a critical role in facilitating asylum seekers' ability to settle in their new communities while complying with their immigration obligations. A promising approach is the transitional housing model being used in Maine to provide on-site access to services that help them with their asylum cases, as well as key medical and social services. In NYC, the city's partnership with the Archdiocese of New York's Catholic Charities Community Services helps people in the asylum process settle in their new communities.

### Helping asylum seekers represent themselves in legal cases

In destination communities, legal assistance to help new arrivals with their asylum cases and related issues, like work permits, is another critical service need. It is also a fundamental tool for helping people move out of transitional shelter and into permanent housing. This is because people can only obtain permission to work lawfully in the US once they file their asylum application and that application has been pending for at least six months. In NYC, the city government and the NGO community have turned to what is known as the "pro se" assistance model, in which people represent themselves instead of being represented by a lawyer. While there is no single type of pro se assistance model, it generally seeks to provide information and guidance to people without lawyers to help them represent themselves in their legal cases. This helps more people seeking asylum than any one organization or attorney can provide.

## Providing training helps people support their families

Once they are allowed to work, providing people seeking asylum with training for well-paid jobs or access to affordable childcare means they can more easily support their families and secure permanent housing.

## Recommendations

To better support individuals in the asylum process, and the cities, states, and organizations currently serving them, the US government should adapt its current approach.

- **Federal funding sources**, as requested by the Biden administration and appropriated by Congress, **should be made available to state and local governments and community organizations** providing housing and services in destination communities.
- There should be **close, comprehensive coordination** between the federal government and state and local governments and community organizations.
- Legal and policy changes that provide **expedited access to work permits and lawful status** for people seeking asylum in US destination communities are critical.

Read the [full brief](#).

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## 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.

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