

# Welcoming and Supporting People Seeking Asylum: Lessons Learned in New York City and Portland, Maine

## Introduction

As increasing numbers of people face displacement around the world, not least in the Western Hemisphere, the need for safe, orderly, and humane reception of those seeking safety becomes ever more critical. While often viewed only through a crisis narrative, the reality is that [displacement will continue](#), and it is incumbent that the US government at the federal, state, and local level, coupled with civil society, implement smart and practical short- and long-term solutions in response. Key to ensuring the successful welcoming of people seeking protection is an understanding of the differing operational and service needs that arise throughout the migration process, from arrival to settling into a destination community.<sup>1</sup>

The Women's Refugee Commission's (WRC's) Migrant Rights and Justice (MRJ) program recently undertook monitoring visits to New York City (NYC) and Portland, Maine.<sup>2</sup> We saw firsthand that the operational and service demands in these destination locations go beyond meeting immediate basic needs to supporting the need for stability in a new community and navigating complex and often lengthy immigration processes. Adequately addressing and meeting these needs in destination locations continues the work begun by shelters and service providers facilitating immediate reception at the border. Both serve to avoid costly and [harmful immigration detention](#) and [facilitate the efficient functioning](#) of immigration processes, and are integral to the US government's immigration system. Moreover, effective welcoming of people seeking asylum in their destinations better integrates new neighbors into their local communities and economies, benefiting those in the process and their new communities.

Based on our observations and interviews<sup>3</sup> with a wide variety of stakeholders,<sup>4</sup> we found that both NYC and Portland offer promising best practices in the reception of those seeking protection. At the same time, they face challenges in meeting the needs of the new arrivals, especially without more coordination and investment. **What WRC learned can inform not only state and local policy and program design in other destinations around the US, but also federal policy and funding approaches.** A central need in migrant reception programs and practices is identifying and lowering barriers faced by people seeking asylum in settling in their new communities and navigating their asylum cases. This brief outlines WRC's observations on what those barriers are based on our visits, and makes recommendations for the steps needed to begin to address them.

## Programs Face Challenges

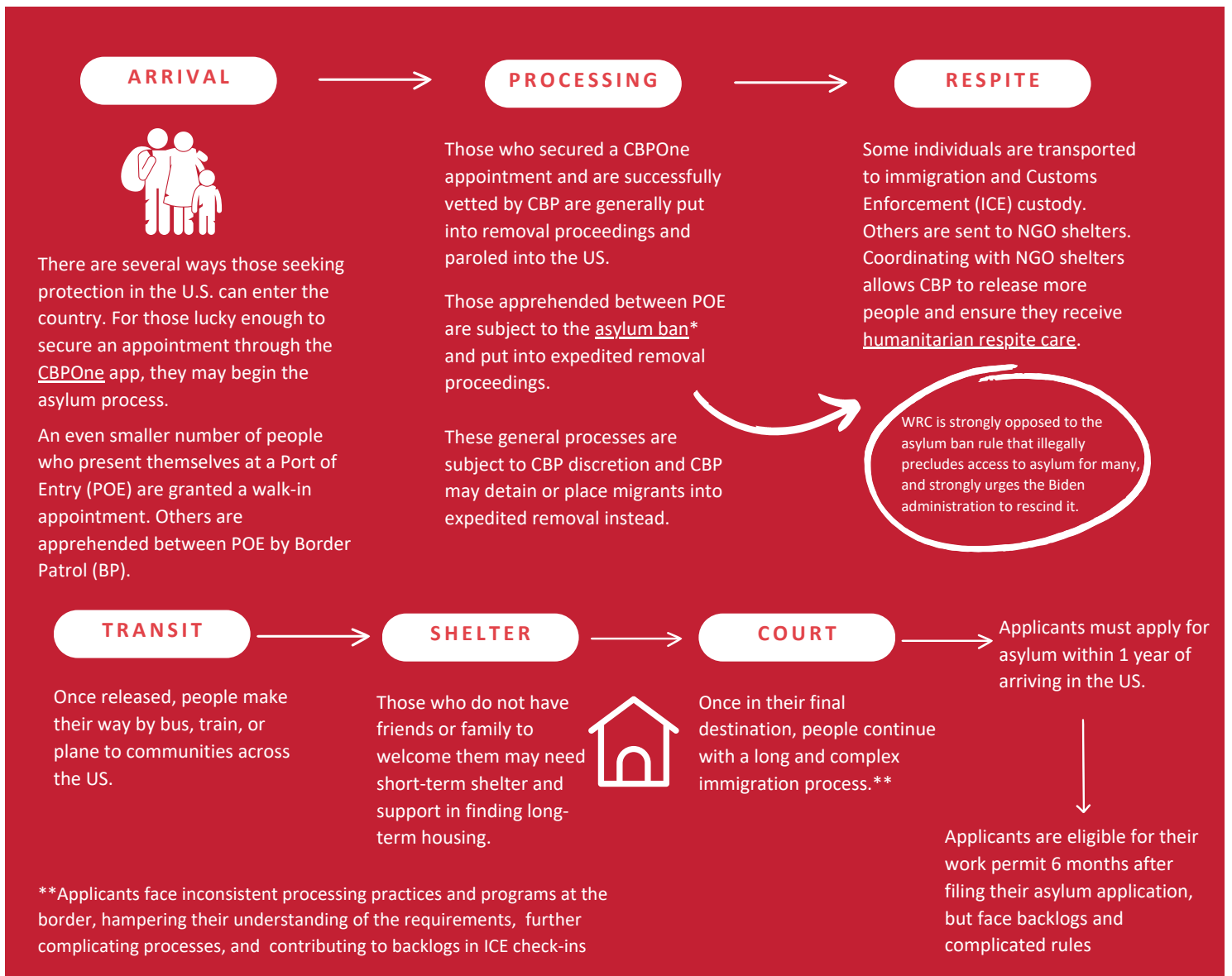
The best practices that WRC observed during its monitoring visits coexisted with significant challenges, both those that WRC heard about and that have been widely reported in media.\* Civil society stakeholders reported concerns with the lack of effective coordination, engagement, and transparency on the part of government actors at multiple levels. Recent reporting has detailed issues with the care and information provided by a [professional staffing company](#) contracted by NYC to run migrant shelters, as well as [community organizations' concerns](#) that NYC has failed to engage their expertise and support to help migrants. In our conversations with people seeking asylum, WRC also observed that the migrants themselves lacked a clear understanding of the process, their obligations, and their rights.

\* WRC will be conducting additional monitoring visits to Denver and Chicago in late summer 2023 and plans to release a subsequent report evaluating all four cities and offering further recommendations in fall 2023.

## Support services are a springboard to permanent housing

WRC prioritizes housing, employment, and other services for basic well-being (such as medical care and food) for everyone, irrespective of immigration status. While these observations and recommendations are specific to noncitizens seeking protection in the US, we urge lawmakers and policymakers to ensure that nonimmigration-specific aspects of housing, legal aid, and workforce policies and practices be broadly applied to everyone in need.

For people seeking protection who lack family or friends in the US who can assist them with finding a place to stay, government- and nonprofit-run shelters in destination locales provide a critical lifeline. Shelters along the US-Mexico border are transitory in nature, where respite shelter is designed to meet people's immediate basic needs before they move on to their final destinations elsewhere in the US. Sheltering in destination communities, however, can play a critical role in facilitating migrants' ability to settle quickly and with stability while complying with their immigration obligations.



Temporary housing in both locations comprises a wide range of options, ranging from small-scale shelters run by nonprofit organizations to larger shelters that are part of each city's or state's housing programs. A promising approach to achieving stability in the community for people seeking asylum is the transitional housing model being used in Maine to provide on-site access to case management and key medical and social services. This is true in the city of Portland's new purpose-built [Homeless Services Center](#), which serves both local and newly arriving migrant unhoused populations, as well as in the specialized [Asylum Seeker Transitional Housing Program](#), a public-private partnership grounded in the longstanding refugee resettlement expertise of [Catholic Charities Maine](#). The goal of transitional housing for people seeking asylum is to provide the linguistically and culturally competent support needed to help people transition out of shelter and into permanent housing in the community. For people seeking asylum—and especially more vulnerable populations like women and families with children—such support often includes legal assistance for their immigration cases, medical care and health insurance navigation, workforce access (through federal employment authorization), education and training, English language classes and cultural orientation, and housing market navigation.

The key role played by case management support services in helping people in the asylum process settle in their new communities is also recognized in NYC's [partnership](#) with the Archdiocese of New York's [Catholic Charities Community Services](#). While not directly combined with transitional housing, Catholic Charities provides case management services that are open to walk-ins from across NYC's shelter system<sup>5</sup> and supports people who need additional or ongoing support, whether for prenatal and infant nutrition, behavioral health, medical, employment, or other needs, after their immediate needs are met upon intake into the city shelter system. In addition, numerous other community-based organizations, including many that are smaller, more local, and/or grassroots, such as [Artists Athletes Activists](#) in NYC, provide critical case management services and supports to people seeking asylum, whether through formal partnerships with local government or independently.

## Resettlement Model Pilot Program

WRC strongly supports consideration of a refugee resettlement lens – in which the US government, through public-private partnerships, supports refugees already approved for resettlement in their transition to the United States – in the design and implementation of policies and programs for people seeking asylum in the US. While only in early stages, a potential example of this is New York State's [Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance](#) (OTDA) pilot program [Assistance for Migrants Program](#) (AMP) has received [\\$25 million in funding](#) to provide case management services to certain recently arrived migrants who settle in selected New York counties,\* along with rental assistance and other services to meet basic needs and reach stability. While it is too early to evaluate this pilot program, and questions remain about how it will be communicated to potential participants and how they may be enrolled, WRC will continue to monitor the progress of the AMP.

\* See page 3 of New York State Association of Counties FAQ - Sheltering Migrants: "OTDA is in the process of operationalizing \$25 million for the voluntary relocation of 1,250 families presently in shelter in NYC, including recent migrant arrivals seeking asylum, to welcoming communities across NYS. OTDA will contract with experienced immigration services nonprofit providers. Services may include, but are not limited to, rental assistance, basic needs, case management, legal services, and job placement assistance for eligible families for up to one year."

## Pro se legal assistance as an indispensable force multiplier

In destination communities, immigration legal assistance for new arrivals is not only the most salient service need next to shelter, but also a fundamental tool for helping people move out of shelter and into permanent housing. This is because migrants 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. The [asylum application](#) is long, complex, and must be completed in English and with extensive information and evidence about the harm the applicant has faced or fears they would encounter if returned. This does not take into account additional procedural complications many people in immigration proceedings face. These range from something as simple as changing their address, which must be filed with the multiple federal agencies involved in their cases, to making sure their cases are filed in the right immigration court in their destination community. These complications take on further complexities when people seeking asylum are moved from shelter to shelter or other short-term living situations.

In these conditions, immigration legal assistance is indispensable to ensure migrants can effectively navigate their immigration proceedings, which includes obtaining the permission to work that is so central to achieving independence in their new communities.<sup>6</sup> While the [vast majority of immigrants](#) (83 percent) voluntarily appear for their hearings, compliance is near universal when people have counsel (96 percent).<sup>7</sup> Legal assistance is also critical to navigating changing US policies and programs, especially those aiming to rush families with children through their asylum processes, such as the [Dedicated Docket](#) and the [Family Expedited Removal Management](#) (FERM) process.

This need for legal assistance runs up against the [lack of sufficient immigration lawyers](#) across the US. In NYC, not only the city government but also the NGO community have turned to the *pro se* assistance model, in which someone represents themselves instead of being represented by a lawyer, as a means to expand access to immigration legal help to better meet the demand. While there is no single type of *pro se* assistance model, they generally seek to provide information and guidance to people without lawyers to help them represent themselves in their legal cases. In immigration cases, this can include help filling out applications, like those for asylum or work permits, or help filing requests to change one's address or court venue.

New York City recently launched its [Asylum Application Help Center](#), a *pro se* assistance model bringing together nonprofit immigration legal services organizations, law firm attorneys working *pro bono*, private immigration lawyers, and [university students](#) to help people seeking asylum in NYC file their applications for asylum and work authorization. This effort complements civil society efforts like the [Pro Se Plus Project](#), a *pro se* assistance model that capitalizes on the special expertise of each of its seven community-based organizations and legal services organizations to reach, educate, and support many more asylum-seeking communities than would be possible for any of the organizations on their own. The Pro Se Plus Project's legal services organizations assist with asylum applications, change of venue, change of address, work authorization applications, and other *pro se* assistance.

These *pro se* assistance model efforts build on existing efforts—like the [Immigration Court Helpdesk](#)—and those by legal services organizations in New York City, Maine, and elsewhere to provide force multiplier resources to help more people seeking asylum than any one organization or attorney can represent. [Immigrant Advocates Response Collaborative](#) (I-ARC) has been a pioneer in this space in New York state. In Maine, the [Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project](#) provides a range of legal services to migrants, from *pro se* assistance to full representation, and also plays a key outreach and education role for service providers helping their migrant clients navigate complex immigration processes.

## Supporting workforce entry beyond federal work permits

Permission to work in the US while their asylum cases are pending is fundamental to people's ability to move from shelter to permanent housing. In addition, promising practices demonstrate the value of including workforce-access-related services and programming to migrants to help them successfully and independently support their families.

In NYC, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) safety training classes required for construction jobs that are offered for free by community-based organizations around the city are in [high demand](#), including by [women seeking asylum](#). NYC also oversaw the expansion of childcare services to migrant families with young children through the [Promise NYC](#) program. This has [enabled caregivers](#)<sup>8</sup> to secure work outside the shelters, which is necessary to put them on the path to permanent housing.

## Recommendations for supporting and expanding welcoming practices in destination locations

While the reception of and support for people seeking asylum across the US requires a multi-pronged, multi-level approach, the recommendations in this brief focus in particular on the US federal government. More in-depth recommendations will follow with our longer report evaluating all four cities.

To better support those in the immigration system, and the cities, states, and organizations currently serving them, the US government should adapt its response to humanitarian reception of people seeking asylum in destination locations across the US, grounded in a recognition of the distinction between the typically shorter-term nature of welcoming at the border and the longer-term needs in destination communities. This response to the distinct needs of new arrivals and the destination communities welcoming them should include:

**Federal funding sources, as requested by the Biden administration and appropriated by Congress, for state and local governments and community organizations providing housing and services in destination communities. These funds must be transparently administered and responsive to community-based stabilization needs such as transitional housing, case management services, and legal assistance.** States and localities are investing enormous funds into receiving migrant populations, which should be complemented by federal funds.

While previously the [Emergency Food and Shelter Program](#) (EFSP) and now the [Shelter and Services Program](#) (SSP) have supported critical welcoming services and infrastructure, these programs were designed for shorter-term emergency respite reception, which continues to [need sustained investment](#) and [attention](#). Funding should be grant-based, long-term, flexible to the needs of local communities, and decoupled from any immigration enforcement.

Lawmakers and policymakers should expand their programming references beyond emergency response to programs like the transitional housing models used in Maine for people seeking asylum, as well as complementary wraparound case management services that can be tailored to individual needs, such as the promising federal [Case Management Pilot Program](#).<sup>9</sup>

**Close, comprehensive coordination with state and local governments and community organizations.** Although coordination among NGOs has been critical, and organizations like [Cities for Action](#) and [Welcoming America](#) have played a key role in connecting cities and counties across the country, neither civil society nor a patchwork of state and local governments can replace the federal government's capacity and authority to coordinate the reception of migrants nationally.<sup>10</sup>

The federal government should prioritize development of a national coordination strategy that includes not only the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) but also Health and Human Services (HHS) and Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Officials should draw from but also improve on existing models such as the [Southwest Border Coordination Center](#), as well as look for reference to related contexts such as refugee resettlement or [state Offices of New Americans](#),<sup>11</sup> or to affordable housing, where national NGOs like the [National Low Income Housing Coalition](#) play a convening role for government and civil society actors.

**Legal and policy changes that provide expedited access to work permits and lawful status for people seeking asylum in US destination communities.** Congress should act on common-sense bills such as the [Asylum Seeker Work Authorization](#) and [ASPIRE](#) Acts, which reduce the waiting period from 180 to 30 days and make work permits valid for the duration of the asylum case, ensuring that people seeking asylum can get to work and keep working while their asylum cases are pending.

The Biden administration should address critical backlogs in work permit adjudications as well as capitalize on its available legal tools, including expanding [Temporary Protected Status](#) (TPS) and Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) designations for people seeking protection in the US after fleeing danger in countries such as Venezuela, Nicaragua, and South Sudan.

The administration should also engage with entities such as [Cities for Action](#), which led more than 50 mayors and county executives across the country in providing [detailed recommendations](#) to the Biden administration on policy and regulatory actions it should take to expedite access to work permits for people seeking protection in the US. WRC also joined [more than 100 NGOs](#) making similar recommendations to DHS to ensure equitable access to work authorization for people seeking safety

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For more information, contact Katharina Obser, Director, Migrant Rights & Justice Program, at [katharinao@wrcommission.org](mailto:katharinao@wrcommission.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. [womensrefugeecommission.org](http://womensrefugeecommission.org).

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## Endnotes

- 1 As an example, the Women’s Refugee Commission (WRC) and Jewish Family Service of San Diego’s [Blueprint for Humanitarian Reception](#) highlights best practices for welcoming people upon arrival at the border.
- 2 WRC will be conducting additional monitoring visits to Denver and Chicago in late summer 2023 and plans to release a subsequent report evaluating all four cities and offering further recommendations in fall 2023.
- 3 We note that we were only able to interview a very limited number of people seeking asylum in these communities, and as such our observations and recommendations do not and are not meant to reflect specific conditions that were not observed firsthand.
- 4 WRC wishes to thank the people seeking asylum who generously spoke with us about their experiences. WRC would also like to thank the more than 30 organizations that engaged with us, including the Archdiocese of New York Catholic Charities, Catholic Migration Services of Brooklyn, and the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project (ILAP).
- 5 Despite repeated requests, WRC was unable to gain access to the Humanitarian Emergency Response and Relief Centers (HERRCs), the shelters run by city agency NYC Health and Hospitals and designed to respond to the needs of people seeking asylum. HERRCs generally include on-site medical and behavioral health services, as well as case management.
- 6 It is also critical to ensure that asylum applications are filed in a timely but thorough manner, to ensure that people seeking protection can adequately and comprehensively make out their case for asylum, rather than unduly rushing an application to start the work permit timeline in the short term and potentially sacrificing their long-term ability to obtain protection.
- 7 Moreover, between 2008 and 2018, 15 percent of removal orders issued for failure to appear were overturned, meaning that a significant number of migrants in the small minority of those who fail to appear had a valid reason for their absence, whether they never received notice from the government or had an emergency that prevented their attendance. Ingrid Eagly, Esq. and Steven Schafer, Esq. The American Immigration Council, [Measuring In Absentia Removal in Immigration Court](#) (Jan. 2021).
- 8 Sandra Escallón, NBC New York, [NYC leaders shake hands on \\$107b budget; deal includes child care for undocumented children](#), June 29, 2023.
- 9 Another key reference for federally- funded case management for people seeking asylum is the now-terminated [Family Case Management Program](#).
- 10 The [American Immigration Council](#) recently proposed a [Center for Migrant Coordination](#) as a model to facilitate such coordination across all levels of government and civil society.
- 11 The [National Office of New Americans Act of 2023](#) would establish a federal-level Office of New Americans.