

## SNAPSHOT

Beginning in 2022, people seeking safety in the United States began arriving in more significant numbers in communities across the country, especially in several cities in the interior of the country, far from the southwest border with Mexico. Coinciding with historic global displacement and at a time of ever-growing affordable housing crises in the US, this growing trend highlighted the arrival and needs of vulnerable people seeking safety in the US in ways they had not been before.

To learn more about how cities were responding to people seeking asylum, and to better understand the best practices and challenges in supporting them, in 2023, the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) visited Chicago, Denver, New York City, and Portland, Maine. We spoke to dozens of stakeholders, including federal, state, and local government officials, community-based organizations, grassroots advocates, legal service providers, and people seeking asylum to learn about best practices and challenges to effective, efficient, and dignified reception of people seeking asylum in US communities.

We found that those seeking protection in the U.S. face myriad challenges as they navigate the immigration process. Each of the cities we visited has different processes for reception of people seeking asylum, but common themes of best practices and the challenges faced in each emerged based on our many interviews.

### Key best practices for welcoming people seeking asylum

- Provide community-led case management support services, that is, have local organizations with community knowledge and expertise help people seeking asylum meet their basic needs and find stability in their new communities.
- Provide rental assistance programming tailored to the needs of people seeking asylum and private hosting programs that catalyze community involvement and integration.
- Develop innovative legal assistance programs that maximize the limited capacity of immigration legal service providers and private attorneys.
- Leverage public-private partnerships that capitalize on the complementary strengths of government and community resources.

### Key challenges for welcoming people seeking asylum

- Emergency shelters do not foster community support and integration.
- Crisis response mode leads to sustainability and transparency issues.
- Legal service providers face capacity and funding barriers.
- Preexisting community disinvestment leads to tension with new arrivals.
- Incomplete coordination and support from the federal government.

**More than anything, our findings demonstrate the need to end the inaccurate and unserviceable “crisis mode” response to the durable reality of displaced people seeking safety.** Effective and sustainable policies ensuring the safe, orderly, and dignified reception of people seeking asylum require long-term planning that recognizes and embraces the reality of global displacement. It is essential for policymakers at all levels to devote time and resources to long-term infrastructure, policy, and practice to finally end a perpetual cycle of rapid response. Local and state governments have critical roles to play in the response, but long-term change in the dignified reception of people seeking asylum also requires transformative policy changes at the national level.

This moment offers an irreplaceable opportunity to harness a rising tide to lift all boats, to improve policies for all people in need of safety, whether from unhoused situations, preventable negative health outcomes, or persecution in their home country. WRC prioritizes housing, employment, and other services for basic well-being (such as medical care and food) for everyone, irrespective of immigration status. Chief among our the report's comprehensive recommendations are:

**States and localities should:**

- Provide leadership in welcoming and integrating people seeking asylum and other migrants.
- Coordinate with institutions and organizations to ensure the responsive, sustainable, and innovative reception of people seeking asylum.
- Establish and expand programming and funding for benefits, services, and supports for people seeking asylum and other protections.
- Engage the expertise of and community trust in community-based organizations providing services to people seeking asylum and other migrants.

**The US Congress** must prioritize and substantially increase transparent, flexible, and responsive investment for state and local governments and community organizations providing housing and services in destination communities.

**The Biden administration** should establish and lead a whole-of-government approach to coordinating the safe, orderly, and dignified reception of people seeking asylum in the US.

**The Department of Homeland Security** should implement both immediate and long-term measures to make the immigration process and reception more efficient, orderly, and humane, including addressing complexities and backlogs for work permits.

**Agencies**, including the Departments of Justice, Health and Human Services, Education, and Labor, should a wide range of creative opportunities to reduce barriers and/or increase access to programs that could support people seeking asylum with finding stability during their immigration process and strengthen the capacity of states and organizations trying to serve them.

**Philanthropy** should ensure that funding for direct services provides sufficient flexibility to allow for pivot to emerging needs, as well as sufficient unrestricted funding for administrative support and overhead.

[Read](#) *Opportunities for Welcome: Lessons Learned for Supporting People Seeking Asylum in Chicago, Denver, New York City, and Portland, Maine.*

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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.

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

The Women's Refugee Commission wishes to express our gratitude to the funders who made this work possible.

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