




WOMEN'S  
REFUGEE  
COMMISSION



Opportunities for Welcome: Lessons Learned for  
Supporting People Seeking Asylum in Chicago,  
Denver, New York City, and Portland, Maine

November 2023



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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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Beginning in 2022, the arrival of people seeking safety in the United States became newly visible in communities across the country. This increased visibility was partly fueled by a concerted, politicized effort by some border state governors to bus people seeking asylum to cities like New York, Chicago, and Denver, but more importantly combined with historic displacement and affordable housing crises to make manifest the arrival and needs of vulnerable people seeking safety in the US in ways they had not been before. In 2023, the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) engaged in research and monitoring in four US cities, New York City; Portland, Maine; Denver; and Chicago, where we identified key best practices and challenges in welcoming and supporting people seeking asylum in US communities.

### *Key best practices for welcoming people seeking asylum*

- Early and comprehensive deployment of community-led case management support services.
- Rental assistance programming tailored to the needs of people seeking asylum.
- Private hosting programs that catalyze community involvement and integration.
- Innovative legal assistance delivery models that maximize the limited capacity of immigration legal service providers and private attorneys.
- State leadership and support for the dignified reception of people seeking asylum.
- Public-private partnerships that capitalize on the complementary strengths of government and community resources.

### *Key challenges for welcoming people seeking asylum*

- The limitations of shelters as emergency rather than long-term solutions for community support and integration.
- Emergency or crisis response mode can lead to procurement and sustainability issues, as well as transparency concerns.
- The persistence of capacity and funding barriers for legal service providers.
- Preexisting community disinvestment and tension with new arrivals.
- Incomplete coordination and support from the federal government.

In this report, WRC makes comprehensive recommendations to local and state governments, relevant federal government agencies and actors, and philanthropic institutions on actions that these various bodies can and should take to move beyond crisis framing and rapid response to the design and implementation of sustainable policies and practices to support people seeking asylum and other vulnerable people in need of shelter and basic services in US communities. As stakeholders across all four cities that we visited emphasized, the arrival of people seeking asylum and other forms of protection in the US is a durable phenomenon that requires long-term, flexible, and sustainable solutions that enable whole communities to thrive.

## INTRODUCTION

Starting in 2022, the arrival of people seeking asylum and other protections in the United States became newly visible in communities across the US and especially in several larger cities in the interior of the country, far from the southwest border with Mexico. These communities found themselves responding to the humanitarian needs of newly arrived people seeking safety, repurposing existing systems and developing new ones all while working to prevent homelessness and hunger for vulnerable individuals and families.

The Women's Refugee Commission's (WRC's) Migrant Rights and Justice (MRJ) program has long engaged in research, monitoring, and advocacy for the safe, orderly, and dignified reception of people seeking asylum at the US-Mexico border and community-based support for people navigating the immigration process. This knowledge and perspective is critical as federal, state, and local governments, as well as community-based organizations, work in real time to identify, develop, and scale effective and sustainable practices for welcoming and supporting people seeking asylum in US communities.

During the summer of 2023, WRC's MRJ program visited four cities across the United States: New York City (NYC); Portland, Maine;<sup>1</sup> Denver; and Chicago. 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.

This report details our findings from this research and these observations. It begins with an explanation of the journey of a migrant seeking asylum or other protection through the immigration process, and then details the reception process in each of the four cities. This is followed by an exploration of best practices and challenges in the effective reception and processing of people seeking asylum and comprehensive recommendations to lawmakers and policymakers at all levels of government, as well as to the philanthropic community. While this report is specific to noncitizens seeking protection in the US, we urge lawmakers and policymakers to also broadly apply relevant aspects of housing, legal aid, and workforce policies to everyone in need.

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 new normal. While such planning will feel challenging in the short-term, it is essential for policymakers at all levels to devote time and resources to long-term infrastructure, policy, and practice so as to finally end a perpetual cycle of rapid response. Local and state governments have critical roles to play in the response, but the efficacy and sustainability of policies for the dignified reception of people seeking asylum and other protections depend on significant, big-picture policy changes at the national level. Moreover, 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.

***While such planning will feel challenging in the short-term, it is essential for policymakers at all levels to devote time and resources to long-term infrastructure, policy, and practice so as to finally end a perpetual cycle of rapid response.***

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1 WRC published some initial findings from research and monitoring done in NYC and Portland, Maine in September 2023: [Welcoming and Supporting People Seeking Asylum: Lessons Learned in New York City and Portland, Maine](#).





## BACKGROUND

The US immigration system has long been out of step with the contemporary realities of migration and [displacement](#), which has reached all-time highs. This misalignment becomes an enormous chasm in the context of humanitarian protection needs, as people seeking safety in the US confront an asylum system that is historically [backlogged](#), [under-resourced](#), and [designed](#) for mid-20th century Cold War priorities. Persistent [Congressional inaction](#) on meaningful reform to this outdated system has left the Executive Branch with severely limited tools to effectively and humanely respond to people seeking protection. Perhaps most protective among these is the designation of [temporary protected status](#) (TPS), which grants the individual protective status with work authorization, but is subject to administrative renewals that leave people in seemingly permanent limbo. [Humanitarian parole](#) allows an individual to be legally present in the United States, but still requires that person to apply for and receive some kind of immigration legal status<sup>2</sup> in order to remain beyond the period of parole.<sup>3</sup> Current parole programs, while having expanded the opportunity to travel more safely to the US to seek protection, are riddled with [barriers](#), especially for [vulnerable populations](#). The Biden administration has also pursued other [administrative tweaks](#) in processing priorities or timeframes to speed access to immigration status and work authorization. While WRC lauds the current administration's efforts to capitalize on its executive authority to ameliorate the significant challenges in the US immigration system, Congressional action is indispensable to making the US immigration system responsive to 21st-century [migration and displacement trends](#).

The past few years have brought [significant changes](#) to the populations of people arriving to seek protection in the US. In the 2010s, many people from the Northern Triangle of Central America fled their countries and sought safety in the US, often in long-established [Central American immigrant communities](#). This changed in recent years as the [Venezuelan displacement crisis](#) reached [historic proportions](#), together with destabilization in [Nicaragua](#), [Haiti](#), Cuba, [Colombia](#), [Ecuador](#), and African countries like [Mauritania](#) and the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), not to mention the Afghan and [Ukrainian](#) conflicts. Unlike Central Americans, who many noted found support through established networks and communities in the US, many people whom WRC spoke to observed that Venezuelans typically lack or have only precarious ties to the US. Moreover, many Venezuelans [lack financial or other resources](#) due to economic collapse and political persecution in Venezuela and the economic and social marginalization of Venezuelans in other South American countries like [Peru](#) and Chile. This reality has left Venezuelans—who comprised a majority or plurality of people seeking asylum in three of the four cities we visited—particularly vulnerable on arrival to the US.

All four communities that we visited—New York City; Portland, Maine; Denver; and Chicago—are suffering from [affordable housing crises](#) and related increases in the numbers of unhoused residents. Denver's new mayor Mike Johnston declared a [state of emergency](#) to address the preexisting homelessness crisis, while Chicago's new mayor Brandon Johnson created a [chief homelessness officer](#) and proposed a special real estate tax to raise funds necessary to reduce homelessness. Even though people resettled as [refugees in the United States and people seeking asylum](#) are both in need of protection that they could not find in their home countries, only those resettled as refugees to the US and people already granted asylum here, known as asylees, receive assistance with housing and other basic needs. This leaves people going through the asylum process—those who are not subject to arbitrary immigration detention—to navigate settling into a new community in a strange country on their own. This circumstance is made even more difficult where people seeking asylum lack existing or reliable ties in the US.

2 People seeking protection in the US have extremely limited options for securing permanent immigration status. See, e.g., the Cato Institute's [Green Card Game](#).

3 Parole may also be renewed for additional periods of time, known as ["re-parole."](#)

Beginning in 2022, the worldwide historic displacement crisis collided with a [concerted political effort](#) by border state governors, primarily Texas Governor Greg Abbott, but also the governor of Arizona, to transport families seeking asylum away from the southern border to select cities across the United States. While gravitation toward large urban centers offering greater economic opportunity has [always been a feature](#) of migration [across the world](#), whether internal or international, the Texas and [Arizona](#) busing campaigns channeled these trends and fueled [word-of-mouth networks](#) that led other people to travel to the same urban destinations in search of stability. In many cases, people may have had a different US destination in mind but, lacking the resources to travel there, accept free transportation to NYC or Chicago [in the hope](#) that they could get help with onward travel there.

With many people seeking asylum in the US arriving without durable connections, the combination of a backlogged and outdated asylum system, affordable housing crises, and border state busing has led to concentrations of people seeking asylum in need of shelter and other basic services in US cities, including but not limited to New York City, Chicago, Denver, and Portland, Maine. This phenomenon has been accompanied by a media narrative characterized by chaos and dehumanizing language referring to people seeking protection as “flows,” “surges,” and other language associated with natural occurrences<sup>4</sup> rather than human beings. While the new trends in asylum-seeking populations and their interactions with federal and local systems inadequately equipped to address them bring real challenges, what WRC saw again and again in its research were people working to welcome newcomers with dignity. This report seeks to harness their experience and expertise to provide evidence-based recommendations to lawmakers and policymakers on how to restore and improve US protection systems.

*...[W]hat WRC saw again and again in its research were people working to welcome newcomers with dignity.*

## METHODOLOGY

The analysis and recommendations in this report are based on field and desk research. WRC interviewed dozens of stakeholders in NYC; Portland, Maine; Denver; Chicago and beyond in person and virtually about their work and knowledge related to the reception of people seeking asylum. These stakeholders included representatives of city and state governments; community-based organizations of varying sizes, including grassroots organizations, engaging in service provision or advocacy related to recently arrived people seeking asylum; legal services providers; shelter providers; and federal government officials. At the same time, we could not connect with every organization and advocate welcoming people seeking safety in these cities, with the result that any omission is inadvertent and has no bearing on the value of the work being done to welcome newcomers to these communities. In addition, we spoke to a small number of individuals seeking asylum in the four cities where we conducted research. Unless otherwise stated, we are omitting identifying information to ensure that the individuals who spoke to us could speak freely about their experiences.

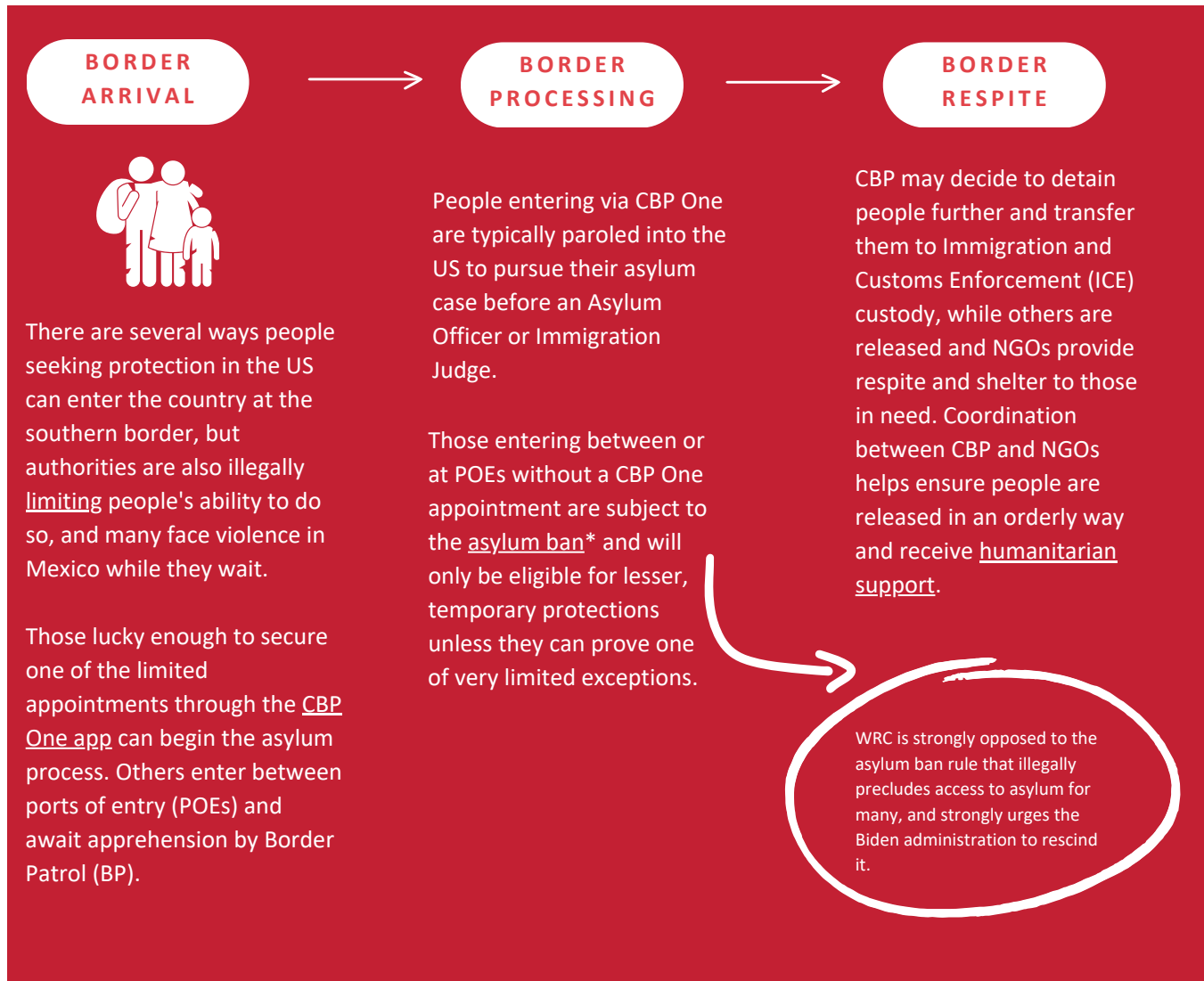
<sup>4</sup> In some cases language can hew toward invasion rhetoric used by anti-democratic extremists to falsely malign people seeking safety as threats.





## OVERVIEW OF THE IMMIGRATION PROCESS: FROM THE SOUTHWEST BORDER TO THE INTERIOR

### *Seeking asylum begins at the border<sup>5</sup> with Customs and Border Protection (CBP)*



<sup>5</sup> This depicts the processing of people who arrive at the southwest border to seek asylum, it does not detail recent parole programs such as Uniting for Ukraine, processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans or for Afghans.

## Reporting to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in Destination City

Once someone is placed in removal proceedings at the border and released by CBP, whether from a port of entry or a US Border Patrol (USBP) station, their case is placed on ICE's "non-detained docket," meaning that ICE tracks their immigration proceedings and the individual's or family's compliance with those proceedings while living in the community.<sup>6</sup> ICE often subjects those who are not detained or released from detention to a number of other reporting or surveillance requirements, ranging from reporting requirements such as telephonic or in-person check-ins on a periodic basis to programming like GPS ankle monitors or the [SmartLINK phone app](#).<sup>7</sup>

While a comprehensive accounting of the various ways in which migrants seeking safety through the US-Mexico border have been processed by CBP and ICE over the past few years is beyond the scope of this report,<sup>8</sup> people seeking asylum are generally required to report to ICE in their destination city. In some cases people are given a SmartLINK phone (a phone with functionality limited to GPS monitoring) or a GPS ankle monitor in addition to their reporting requirements at the ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) office in their destination city. While in some cases people are given specific appointment times to report to ICE, in others people are given a timeframe for checking in (e.g., within 60 days).

In all four locations we visited we learned that ICE space and staffing resources were insufficient to meet processing needs for people arriving from the border to pursue asylum. This, coupled with inconsistencies and errors in processing by CBP, has led to confusion, inefficiencies, backlogs, and bottlenecks, with people waiting in lines or lobbies for hours to try to comply with their reporting requirements. In the face of these challenges, we welcome ICE's efforts to innovate and increase accessibility for people in the immigration process, for example through the introduction of dedicated check-in email inboxes and QR codes with reporting instructions. At the same time, the many variations in processing and the processing backlogs combine to generate significant confusion for people seeking asylum, especially as they work to find stability in their new communities.

## Fighting Deportation in Immigration Court

The immigration courts that adjudicate removal proceedings are, in general, extremely backlogged, with more than [2 million cases](#) before only [659 immigration judges](#). This backlog leaves people seeking protection and permanency in the US in limbo for years. Adding to the confusion is that people arriving in US cities from the southern border may wait weeks or months for their case to be

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- 6 As WRC has extensively explored in other [research and analysis](#), immigration detention is not only inhumane and unjust, robbing people of their ability to effectively make their case for asylum or other protection in the US, but also very expensive when compared to the [cost effectiveness](#) of allowing people to remain in the community with access to [key support services](#).
  - 7 WRC has documented concerns with and flaws of ICE's programs, both in and out of detention. See, e.g., [The Real Alternatives to Detention](#), updated June 5, 2019; [Priorities for Immigrant Communities in the FY2025 White House Budget](#); and [Why Detaining Families Cannot Be the Answer to Increased Migration and Displacement](#), March 9, 2023.
  - 8 ICE has debuted several new "Alternative to Detention" programs during the past year, all of which prioritize surveillance over ensuring people have the support they need in their community and their immigration proceedings. WRC, together with the National Immigrant Justice Center (NIJC) and the Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights, has written elsewhere about concerns with the [Young Adult Case Management Program](#). Denver is one of the pilot sites for the wrist-worn tracking device [VeriWatch](#). However, WRC's greatest concerns are with the (FERM) process, which targets families for expedited removal, rushes them through the credible fear process without meaningful access to counsel, and requires the head of household, usually a mother, to wear a GPS ankle monitor.



“docketed,” or scheduled, before the immigration court.<sup>9</sup> This affects where someone can submit their asylum application and whether it will be accepted.<sup>10</sup> Since someone can only apply for a work permit **150 days** after their asylum application has been filed, not being able to file their application and have it accepted means they have to wait longer before they can gain the work permit they need to support themselves and their family.

*Since someone can only apply for a work permit 150 days after their asylum application has been filed, not being able to file their application and have it accepted means they have to wait longer before they can gain the work permit they need to support themselves and their family.*

## Applying for Protection and Permission to Work

Eligibility for and access to work permits for those seeking protection have become a rallying cry for many cities, given that the ability to work creates much-needed self-sufficiency and access to resources for permanent housing and other support. Yet here, too, the process is complicated and depends on manner and type of entry into the US. Although most people seeking asylum coming from the US-Mexico border must make their application for immigration status (such as asylum) in their removal proceedings,<sup>11</sup> where the Department of Justice’s (DOJ’s) Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) immigration judge adjudicates their application, it is the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS’s) US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) that is responsible for work permit applications, whether based on parole,<sup>12</sup> an asylum application, or **TPS** granted to certain nationalities. USCIS has **significant backlogs** across many of its immigration benefit categories, although WRC has been pleased to note the agency’s efforts to **reduce processing times**<sup>13</sup> for work permits for recently

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- 9 In three of the four cities we visited, Portland, Denver, and Chicago, some asylum-seeking families were placed on the **Dedicated Docket**, a process that seeks to move families through removal proceedings in less than a year, and requiring the head of household to wear an ankle monitor. Legal service providers in all three cities relayed the **serious challenges** that families on the Dedicated Docket face in trying to find attorneys to help them with their asylum cases. This has left many families to **struggle on their own** to navigate the complexity of seeking asylum, compounded by rushed timelines from the immigration court.
- 10 People not in removal proceedings must file their asylum application with US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), where an asylum officer adjudicates their application in an interview. If someone’s immigration case has not been “docketed” (meaning processed and designated in the court system a certain way) by the immigration court, the immigration court will not accept their asylum application. However, a lot of confusion exists around exactly how and when a case is “docketed,” and it is not uncommon for both USCIS and the immigration court to reject an asylum application based on database or procedural inconsistencies.
- 11 Temporary statuses like parole and TPS can overlap with someone’s application for asylum. For example, someone granted parole at a port of entry through a CBPOne appointment or the parole processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans would still need to apply for asylum or another form of permanent immigration status to be able to remain permanently in the US and access a path to citizenship.
- 12 While there are many different kinds of parole, for purposes of this report we are generally speaking of parole under 8 U.S.C. § 212(d)(5) for humanitarian or significant public benefit reasons. CBP has the authority to grant parole to people it processes through ports of entry, whether through CBPOne appointments or walk-ups. In addition to people granted parole at the border, the cities we visited are also welcoming people granted parole through special processes such as those for **Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans, Uniting for Ukraine, Operation Allies Welcome** and **others for Afghans**.
- 13 On September 20, 2023, USCIS **announced its intention** to work to reduce median processing times for parole-based work permits from 90 to 30 days, although **reporting indicated** that USCIS had still not reached this goal by November 2023. In **late October** 2023 a DHS official said that USCIS hoped to achieve 30-day median processing times on all applications, including TPS and work permits.

arrived people seeking asylum.<sup>14</sup> Even more promising are efforts to facilitate the application process, including by having USCIS staff on site for targeted efforts such as a recent [work permit clinic](#) in NYC and [Operation Allies Welcome](#) Welcome Centers for Afghans in California, Maryland, and Virginia.

## Cost and Timeframe Breakdown

TYPE OF STATUS OR PATHWAY	TEMPORARY OR PERMANENT?	WORK PERMIT ELIGIBLE?	FEES	AVERAGE USCIS PROCESSING TIME	PROPOSED REDUCED PROCESSING TIME
<b>Parole</b>	Temporary, though can be combined with other paths	Yes	\$410 for work permit	90 days for work permit	30 days for work permit
<b>Asylum</b>	Permanent with path to citizenship	Yes, once application pending 180 days	\$0 for first work permit	1.5 months for initial work permit	30 days for initial work permit
<b>Temporary Protected Status (TPS)</b>	Temporary	Yes, immediately	\$410 for work permit	11.8 months	No specific reduction proposed

## OVERVIEW OF THE RECEPTION PROCESS

### Travel to Destination

Upon release from CBP custody at the border, whether from a port of entry or Border Patrol station, many people find [temporary shelter](#), food, and other support at shelters run by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and municipal governments along the southwest border. In addition to meeting people’s basic needs and preventing people from being released into the street, respite shelters, whether run by [NGOs](#) or [city governments](#), often help people travel on to their final destinations.

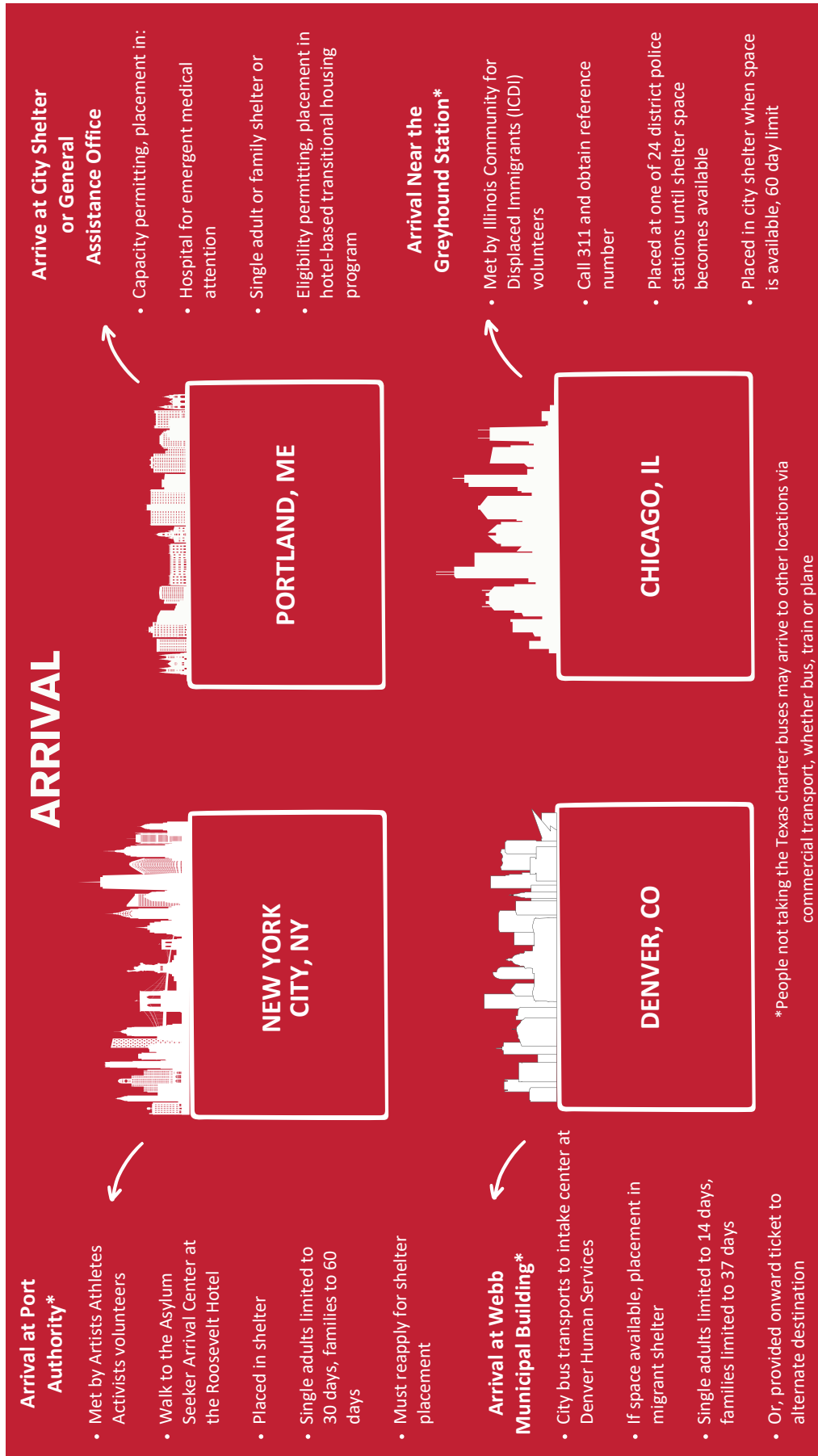
The politicized [busing programs](#) of Texas and Arizona have taken advantage of the vulnerability of people seeking asylum, where many lack resources to pay for their onward ticket or even a place to go where they have strong ties. Instead of helping people obtain commercial transportation based on individual need, these states have chartered buses with destinations chosen based on explicit political goals. In NYC, Denver, and Chicago, three of these politically motivated destinations, multiple stakeholders reported that the people coming on these buses arrive dehydrated, hungry, and weak after traveling for up to two days with little respite.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Texas [refuses](#) to [coordinate](#) with the destination cities, denying requests to adjust arrival locations or times to better facilitate reception services and protect the well-being of passengers, including children. In

14 Legal service providers informed WRC that some recent arrivals have been victims of serious crimes in the US or severe mistreatment by immediate family members and are eligible to pursue other humanitarian protections such as the U visa, the T visa, Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), or Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) relief. In these cases the survivor’s victimization has often been tied to their vulnerability to employment or other exploitation.

15 The subpar conditions on these chartered buses were made tragically apparent by the [death of a three-year-old girl](#) en route from Texas to Chicago.



# Intake Processes by City



November 2023, Chicago [announced](#) its intention to cite and fine bus companies that disregard local protocols, including curfews and unloading locations.

This refusal to coordinate for political ends and at the expense of the well-being of [more than 50,000 people](#) seeking safety has highlighted the absence of a national coordination strategy for the reception of people seeking asylum. While the creation of such a strategy and system would be complicated by the realities of federalism and varying political interests, stakeholders in all four locations we visited emphasized the imperative need for better coordination. Stakeholders expressed a particular need for advance notice and reliable trend information in order to effectively plan long term. The rapid-response mode endemic to the majority of stakeholders we spoke to was only exacerbated by not having any or only last-minute notice of the arrival of people seeking asylum in need of shelter and other help.

## RECEPTION AND SUPPORT OF PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM BY CITY

### New York, New York

#### Shelters

As of the time of publishing, NYC has significantly expanded its already robust shelter system in response to the arrival of people seeking asylum, catalyzed by the [politicized busing efforts](#) of Texas and Arizona. The shelter system exists in the context of the right to shelter originally recognized through the [Callahan v. Carey consent decree](#),<sup>16</sup> although NYC has [proposed modifications](#) by arguing that resources are inadequate to fulfill the right to shelter for people arriving who are seeking asylum. While court proceedings are ongoing, there has been robust [civil society opposition](#) to the city's effort to diminish the right to shelter.

In [general](#) there are four kinds of city-run shelters in NYC. The majority of the approximately [212 migrant shelters](#) city-wide are managed by the [Department of Homeless Services](#). There are approximately 17 [Humanitarian Emergency Response and Relief Centers \(HERRCs\)](#), which are designed to respond to the specialized needs of people seeking asylum and are managed by [NYC Health and Hospitals](#). A smaller proportion of people seeking asylum are housed by the [Department of Housing Preservation and Development](#). There are also [respite shelters](#), intended for short-term stays only,<sup>17</sup> operated by [NYC Emergency Management](#). In most cases, the city agency in question contracts out the day-to-day operations of shelters to various for-profit and nonprofit service providers.

Beginning in July 2023, the city imposed length-of-stay limits on single adult migrants, first of [60 days](#), then further reducing the length of stay to [30 days](#) in September 2023.<sup>18</sup> This shelter length-of-stay limit<sup>19</sup> applies only to asylum-seeking new arrivals and not the local unhoused population. In October 2023, the city announced a [60-day length of stay limit for migrant families](#),<sup>20</sup> a move

16 Another case, *Boston v. City of New York*, [governs](#) the right to shelter for families with minor children.

17 Although the respite shelters are only designed for brief stays before residents are supposed to be moved to longer-term shelters, NYC stakeholders reported seeing people remain in respite centers for weeks or months at a time.

18 This 30-day length of stay limit for single adult migrants was expanded to those in Department of Homeless Services shelters in [November 2023](#).

19 As people's length of stays began [expiring](#) in October 2023, migrants seeking to reapply for shelter were sent to dedicated [reticketing facilities](#) where they were told that the city would [purchase](#) them a ticket for onward travel to a destination of their choice. The city also established "[waiting areas](#)" or "[waiting rooms](#)" for those whose shelter time expires.

20 As of the publication of this report, this length of stay limit on families with children only applies to those in the HERRCs, as





that was [criticized by advocates](#) for the unhoused and people seeking asylum alike as particularly [harmful](#) for children.

## Support Services

The city government established resource navigation services for people seeking asylum in September 2022, with a [central office](#)<sup>21</sup> and later [satellites](#) throughout the five boroughs. The city has contracted with various [community-based organizations](#) to provide resource navigation services, including [healthcare services](#) and referrals, health insurance, school enrollment, and mental health counseling. WRC highlighted the case management services provided by the Archdiocese of New York's [Catholic Charities Community Services](#) as part of NYC's resource navigation services suite in its September 2023 brief [Welcoming and Supporting People Seeking Asylum: Lessons Learned in New York City and Portland, Maine](#). While stakeholders reported that access to case management support services on site in the shelters has been much less consistent and robust, in August 2023, New York State announced [\\$20 million in funding](#) to provide case management services to help more than 30,000 people seeking asylum exit NYC shelters and obtain work permits.

Although immigration legal orientation services were made part of the Asylum Seeker Resource Navigation Center, the city government, with [funding](#) from the state government, significantly expanded immigration legal services in July 2023 by creating the [Asylum Application Help Center](#). This *pro se* assistance model<sup>22</sup> collaborates with the private bar, immigration legal services providers, immigrant advocates, and law students to assist people seeking asylum prepare and file their asylum applications. The city has further expanded these efforts in [partnership](#) with the New York State government and community-based organizations like the [New York Immigration Coalition \(NYIC\)](#) and [Immigrant ARC \(I-ARC\)](#) to support [legal clinics](#) and [case management services](#) to help people apply for asylum, TPS, and work permits. These efforts are complemented by existing funding for immigration legal services, notably the [New York Immigrant Family Unity Project](#).

Community-based organizations, grassroots advocates, and everyday volunteers have been critical to providing support to people arriving in NYC from the border to seek safety and stability while they go through their immigration process. For example, homeless shelter provider and advocacy organization [Win](#) works in partnership with the [New York Legal Assistance Group \(NYLAG\)](#) to identify and meet the legal needs of people seeking asylum staying in Win's shelters. Grassroots organizations like [Artists Athletes Activists](#) and [Team TLC NYC](#) have ensured a personal, substantive welcome for people arriving from the border, organizing volunteers, offering donated essentials in dignified, welcoming settings like the [Little Shop of Kindness](#),<sup>23</sup> and accompanying people through

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the NYC Department of Homeless Services (NYCDHS) shelters are subject to state oversight, with the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) [refusing](#) to approve length of stay limits on families with children for NYCDHS shelters, where the majority of asylum-seeking families with children are sheltered. However, some families with children have been subject to *de facto* 28-day limits through the city's use of a [hotel vouchers program](#) that requires reapplication every 28 days and usually results in families being placed in another hotel, sometimes at the other end of the city.

- 21 While the Asylum Seeker Resource Navigation Center was first established at the Red Cross building in midtown Manhattan, the center and its services, with the exception of legal services, was moved to the [Asylum Seeker 24/7 Arrival Center](#) at the Roosevelt Hotel in July 2023.
- 22 Various examples of *pro se* assistance programs for people seeking asylum were described in WRC's September 2023 brief [Welcoming and Supporting People Seeking Asylum: Lessons Learned in New York City and Portland, Maine](#), including the [Pro Se Plus Project](#). In *pro se* assistance programs, a person represents themselves instead of being represented by a lawyer.
- 23 [Extreme flooding](#) closed the Little Shop of Kindness in late September 2023 until Team TLC NYC can identify a new location.

their process of settling into their new communities. Artists Athletes Activists greets migrants arriving at Port Authority bus station and other NYC ports of entry.

### *City and State Infrastructure for People Seeking Asylum*

NYC has an office dedicated to issues relating to immigrants, the [Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs \(MOIA\)](#). In addition to helping lead the city's response to the arrival of people seeking asylum from the southern border, MOIA leads [Cities for Action](#), a coalition of nearly 200 mayors and county executives advocating for pro-immigrant policies. In March 2023, NYC created the [Office of Asylum Seeker Operations \(OASO\)](#) to oversee and coordinate support services for families and individuals seeking asylum. The [New York State Office for New Americans](#) is part of a [nationwide network](#) of 18 Office for New Americans offices dedicated to supporting and integrating immigrants at a state level.

As MOIA, the New York State Office for New Americans, and other city and state agencies and community-based organizations began responding to the needs of people seeking asylum who were arriving from the southern border, several city and state benefits already existed to help ensure the new arrivals' well-being and ability to integrate into the community. These include [New York State Driver's License for All](#), NYC government-issued photo identification ([IDNYC](#)), health insurance for [children under 19](#) and pregnant people regardless of immigration status, as well as for [immigrants with federal work permits](#),<sup>24</sup> [emergency Medicaid coverage](#), and low- or no-cost healthcare services in NYC for those without immigration status through [NYC Care](#).

## Portland, Maine

### *Shelters*

In Portland, Maine, the [Department of Health & Human Services](#) is responsible for shelter and related services for people experiencing homelessness. The city runs one main shelter for single adults, the [Homeless Services Center](#), and another for families. From [April](#) to [August 2023](#), Portland maintained a temporary emergency congregate shelter for people seeking asylum at its Expo Center, moving the remaining families to hotels in nearby communities when it closed. In addition to these facilities, the City of Portland also partners with the State of Maine and community-based organizations on shelter programs, including the [Asylum Seeker Transitional Housing Program](#) operated by Catholic Charities Maine featured in our September 2023 [brief](#). In another public-private effort, the City of Portland is currently finalizing a [new shelter](#) for single adult people seeking asylum to be run in partnership with the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition (MIRC).

Portland also hosts a number of privately-run shelters and housing assistance programs, many affiliated with religious organizations. A leading example is the program run by [Greater Portland Family Promise](#), which provides intensive, culturally competent case management services and a shelter model to asylum-seeking families with children in partnership with participating congregations and local community-based organizations. Another program is the Quality Housing Coalition's [Project HOME](#), which connects landlords and homeshare providers with tenants receiving case management services. Local community-based organization [Hope Acts](#) supports people seeking asylum participating in Project HOME, while in July 2023 the Greater Portland Council of Governments announced a new [Homeshare program](#) geared to finding small-scale landlords to provide people seeking asylum with housing. And while Portland leads the state in

<sup>24</sup> People over 65 years of age will be eligible for Medicaid regardless of immigration status [beginning January 1, 2024](#).



providing shelter and housing support services to unhoused people generally, whether long-term or new Maine residents, in June 2023 South Portland approved a year-long partnership with the State of Maine to provide [transitional housing](#) for people seeking asylum.

### ***Support Services***

While programs like the City of Portland's Homeless Services Center and Catholic Charities Maine's Asylum Seeker Transitional Housing Program provide on-site case management and medical triage services, most people seeking asylum access services through Maine's [General Assistance program](#), which is operated at the municipal level and available to people seeking asylum. For a limited period, the program helps people meet their basic needs, including housing, food, fuel and utilities, and medical and dental.

Although General Assistance funds provide a critical lifeline to help people get the stability they need to go through the immigration process, multiple stakeholders reported ongoing challenges with finding housing, even with General Assistance funds. The affordable housing crisis in the Portland area is so severe that organizations with services dedicated to helping new Maine residents find housing described sharp and steady declines in their ability to find apartments affordable to those relying on General Assistance. This housing gap is significant in light of the key role that General Assistance support can play in helping people transition from shelter to permanent housing and self-sufficiency.

Despite its more remote geography and smaller population, Maine has long had welcoming policies toward refugees and boasts a robust network of community-based organizations serving people seeking asylum and other migrants. Many of these organizations and advocates join together through the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition (MIRC) to provide a [holistic platform](#) to [welcome immigrants](#) in Maine.

Key to this support ecosystem are immigration legal services, where the [Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project \(ILAP\)](#) not only plays a key leadership role in providing a range of legal services to migrants, from *pro se* assistance to full representation, but also plays a key outreach and education role for service providers helping their migrant clients navigate complex immigration processes. This education and guidance for non-legal service providers is critical in light of demand for immigration legal services that far outstrips local capacity.

### ***City and State Infrastructure for People Seeking Asylum***

The City of Portland's Department of Health & Human Services has taken a lead role in the city's response to the arrival of people seeking asylum, including through the city's participation in [Cities for Action](#). The City of Portland's [Office of Economic Opportunity](#) also seeks to integrate people seeking asylum and other residents in need of opportunity alike into the local economy. In August 2023, Maine Governor Janet Mills [signed an executive order](#) directing the creation of an Office of New Americans, which [will join](#) the [nationwide network](#) of state Offices of New Americans.

As described in the previous section, the primary source of existing benefits accessible for people seeking asylum is the General Assistance program. Maine also provides MaineCare health insurance coverage for [children under 21 and pregnant people](#) regardless of immigration status, as well as [emergency Medicaid coverage](#) for other people seeking asylum.

## Denver, Colorado

### Shelters

In late 2022 and early 2023, Denver used park district [recreation centers](#) to provide short-term emergency shelter to people seeking asylum. While recreation centers are no longer being used as shelters, the city has continued to provide short-term emergency shelter in other facilities to people seeking asylum. While the city has imposed varying length-of-stay limits,<sup>25</sup> limits were 21 days for single adults and 30 for families with children during summer 2023. In October 2023, the city **changed** the length of stay limits to 14 days for single adults and 37 days for families with children.<sup>26</sup>

Near the end of former Denver mayor Michael Hancock's term, the city sought to contract with for-profit professional services company [GardaWorld](#) to operate a large congregate shelter for people seeking asylum. Following [significant opposition](#) from community-based service providers, led by the [Colorado office](#) of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), the city **tabled** this effort. The current Denver mayoral administration initiated a [new](#) contractual bidding process for migrant services that it anticipates completing by the end of 2023.

Mayor Mike Johnston [declared](#) a state of emergency for homelessness soon after he took office in July 2023 and set a [goal](#) of housing 1,000 people experiencing homelessness by the end of 2023. Although there are several privately run homeless shelters in the city, waitlists are long for any unhoused Denver resident, whether long-term or newly arrived. The city regularly updates a [dashboard](#) with information on the number of migrants served and sheltered.

### Support Services

Migrants in the emergency shelters have access to legal orientation services in the form of Know Your Rights presentations and connections to *pro se* assistance or limited representation through the [Colorado Asylum Center](#) and [Catholic Charities of Denver](#). Those with hearings in the Denver Immigration Court can access legal help for their immigration cases through the [Immigration Court Helpdesk](#) or [Family Group Legal Orientation](#) programs. In addition, the city of Denver funds the [Denver Immigrant Legal Services Fund](#) and the state of Colorado funds the [Colorado Immigrant Justice Fund](#), both of which expand the availability of legal representation for people in removal proceedings, including those seeking asylum.<sup>27</sup>

Migrants in the emergency shelters are also connected with [state-funded](#) resource navigation services and housing assistance provided by three community-based organizations, [VIVE Wellness](#), [Organización Papagayo](#), and [Servicios de la Raza](#). These community-based organizations routinely go above and beyond to support the new arrivals, including VIVE Wellness operating a summer day camp for [children](#) staying in the shelters.

Housing assistance services are hugely impactful, providing not only funds to help people move out of shelter or other precarious living situations into permanent housing, but also guidance and support in navigating the local housing market and understanding the rules and obligations of renting in the US. As of August 2023, VIVE Wellness alone had helped more than 2,000 people move into apartments in the Denver metro area. Yet, while much of the affordable housing lies outside

25 The city has also paid for [onward travel](#) for people arriving in Denver.

26 The city temporarily suspended these rules in late October 2023 due to [cold weather](#).

27 In [November 2023](#), the local Rose Community Foundation indicated its plans to set up legal clinics to help new arrivals apply for Temporary Protected Status and work permits.



of the city of Denver itself, many of the support services available for people seeking asylum are concentrated in Denver.

Traditional refugee resettlement organizations like [Lutheran Family Services Rocky Mountains](#) have been able to broaden their reach by connecting people in need of protection to resource navigation services for recently arrived people seeking asylum, helping people connect with local resources to meet their needs, whether medical, educational, or nutritional. There are also community-based organizations like [Metro Caring](#), an anti-hunger organization, which is welcoming new arrivals by providing fresh food and connections to community resources.

### *City and State Infrastructure for People Seeking Asylum*

Denver has an office dedicated to issues relating to immigrants, the [Denver Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs \(DOIRA\)](#), and is a member of [Cities for Action](#), the coalition of nearly 200 mayors and county executives advocating for pro-immigrant policies. DOIRA plays a key covering role with the community-based organization serving immigrants, including new arrivals. The [Colorado Office of New Americans](#), part of the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, is part of a [nationwide network](#) of 18 Office for New Americans offices dedicated to supporting and integrating immigrants at a state level.

As DOIRA, the Colorado Office of New Americans, and other city and state agencies and community-based organizations began responding to the needs of people seeking asylum who were arriving from the southern border, several city and state benefits already existed to help ensure the new arrivals' well-being and ability to integrate into the community. In addition to the state and city immigrant legal defense funds mentioned above, the [Colorado Indigent Care Program](#) provides discounted healthcare services to Colorado residents regardless of immigration status. State Medicaid will [expand coverage](#) to children and pregnant people regardless of immigration status starting in 2024. Colorado residents can also [obtain](#) a driver's license or state photo identification regardless of immigration status. Denver also recently initiated the [Denver Basic Cash Assistance Program](#) to support immigrant families impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

## Chicago, Illinois

### *Shelters*

Prior to the arrival of buses from Texas transporting people seeking asylum from the southern border in [August 2022](#), unhoused people in need of shelter [used](#) the City of Chicago non-emergency services telephone number, 311, to obtain a shelter reference number and initiate placement in shelter. In the meantime, and especially if weather conditions were dangerously cold or hot, people would be given temporary shelter in a public hospital or police station. The [Chicago Department of Family Support Services \(DFSS\)](#) has adapted this system in response to people arriving from the border by using the non-emergency services number 311 to assign people a shelter reference number and, [space permitting](#), temporary placement in one of 24 district police stations<sup>28</sup> across the city while they wait for a shelter placement to become available.

The city [established dedicated shelter facilities](#) for people seeking asylum, with the State of Illinois providing support by sheltering families in [hotels](#) in suburban Chicago between August 2022 and

28 People seeking asylum are also arriving from the border [via plane](#), which has led the City of Chicago to establish a [temporary shelter](#) at O'Hare International Airport.



spring 2023. As of the publication of this report, there are approximately 25 migrant shelters across Chicago. Some are for single adults while others are for families with children. Chicago Alderman Andre Vasquez, the chair of the City Council’s Committee on Immigrant and Refugee Rights, manages a [data portal](#) tracking efforts to support people seeking asylum arriving in Chicago, which complements the city’s [New Arrivals Situational Awareness Dashboard](#). While DFSS contracts out the day-to-day operations of the shelters to [Favorite Healthcare Staffing](#), a for-profit service provider, the city issued a [Request for Proposals \(RFP\)](#) in September 2023 calling for community-based providers to bid on migrant shelter operations and services. Simultaneous to the review process for the proposals submitted through this RFP, the city has used an existing State of Illinois contract to hire for-profit professional services company GardaWorld to set up [“base camp” tents](#) to shelter migrants, although the [future](#) of any tent shelters [remains uncertain](#). In addition, in [October 2023](#) the city extended its contract with Favorite Healthcare Staffing for another year.

While [various community-based organizations](#) and even [Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker](#) have criticized the plan to build tent shelters for people seeking asylum, city officials have also encountered [opposition](#) to proposals for new shelters in various neighborhoods across Chicago. As we will discuss in more detail later in the report, opposition to opening migrant shelters is tied to frustrations with decades-long disinvestment in certain Chicago neighborhoods, particularly those on the south and west sides.

In mid-November 2023, the City of Chicago announced a new 60-day length-of-stay limit<sup>29</sup> for people in migrant shelters, applying to new entrants into the shelter system as of November 17, 2023 and to people already in migrant shelters on a rolling basis. At the same time, the State of Illinois announced new funding to establish a centralized migrant intake center<sup>30</sup> and a “winterized soft shelter site”<sup>31</sup> in Chicago.

Chicago also has a number of privately run shelters and housing assistance programs, many affiliated with religious organizations. Both [Bethany House of Hospitality](#) and [Viator House of Hospitality](#) predated the Texas busing campaign and provide shelter and wraparound case management services to young women and men, respectively, who age out of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) immigration custody upon turning 18. As more people seeking asylum arrived in Chicago from the border, both Bethany and Viator House took in young people seeking asylum in need of shelter, including, in Bethany’s case, pregnant and parenting young women together with their young children. Bethany and Viator House’s experience in sheltering people seeking asylum has informed the rapidly growing work of the [Sanctuary Working Group](#), a solidarity organization supporting and accompanying vulnerable migrants in their journey towards sustainable independence.

### *Support Services*

Upon placement in a migrant shelter, people seeking asylum are given a medical evaluation through [Cook County Health](#). Nongovernmental organization [Heartland Alliance](#) also provides medical screening services on site at various shelters on a rotating basis. The State of Illinois [funds](#) case

29 The City [announced](#) that people may be eligible for an extension of the 60-day length-of-stay period due to “extenuating circumstances” that could include medical crisis or severe cold weather. Otherwise people may reapply for shelter placement at the end of their 60-day stay.

30 This new intake center plans to [“prioritize onward movement”](#) for those with friends, family or other connections outside Chicago.

31 The State will use the [same GardaWorld contract](#) used by the City of Chicago to set up the “winterized soft shelter site”.





management services<sup>32</sup> provided on and off site by community-based nonprofit organizations coordinated by [Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights](#) (ICIRR). These services include connecting new arrivals with key benefits and services through the [Illinois Department of Human Services](#), the City of Chicago, and local community-based organizations.

This state funding includes some limited support for the community-based nonprofits that are providing case management at shelters to help people awaiting shelter placement who are staying at police stations. However, the temporary, emergency nature of police station placement means that basic services such as regular access to food or [medical care](#) depends on community volunteers. Chicago has seen a robust network of neighborhood volunteers and mutual aid groups emerge to help people seeking asylum meet their basic needs, including those staying in police stations. [Chicago4All](#) is one example among many of these grassroots initiatives driven by neighbors welcoming new arrivals. The [Latino Policy Forum](#) convenes the [Welcome to Illinois](#) coalition to provide a forum for mutual aid groups, community-based organizations and government officials alike to coordinate efforts in welcoming people seeking asylum.

Illinois had also funded up to six months of [rental assistance](#) to help people seeking asylum move out of shelter and into permanent housing, although WRC is deeply concerned that in mid-November 2023 the State [announced](#) that it was closing the program to new participants arriving after November 17, 2023 and reducing the assistance period to three months.

[Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago](#) helps people receiving rental assistance move out of shelter into permanent housing, providing guidance and support in navigating the local housing market and understanding the rules and obligations of renting in the US. State-funded rental assistance for people seeking asylum has been [impactful](#) over the course of its existence, already helping more than 1,700 families (more than 5,000 people) move into permanent housing, while continuing to increase its footprint in an effort to meet the growing need. Ending it to new arrivals will create serious new obstacles for those unable to initially sufficiently support themselves to find permanent housing on their own.

Chicago has a robust community of immigration legal service providers that have joined together to coordinate resources and services for new arrivals. As WRC explored in its September 2023 [brief](#), the limited capacity of even a robust legal services community given the demand has led to force multiplier innovations like *pro se* or limited representation legal clinics to help people prepare and file their asylum and work permit applications. The [National Immigrant Justice Center](#) has created video and other [Know Your Rights](#) resources, as well as developed and implemented *pro se* asylum workshops and trained other legal services providers on the *pro se* workshop model. [The Resurrection Project's](#) Immigrant Justice Program combines direct representation and *pro se* legal assistance with community navigator programs for both newly arrived and existing immigrant populations. In November 2023 and with support from the City of Chicago and the State of Illinois, The Resurrection Project collaborated with other local legal service providers to [open](#) a work permit clinic<sup>33</sup> for people staying in migrants shelters, with USCIS personnel on site to speed processing.

The City of Chicago awarded funding for May to December 2023 to six legal service providers, coordinated by [The Legal Aid Society of Metropolitan Family Services](#), to provide services to new arrivals, focused on legal orientations, screenings, and *pro se* clinics, with some limited funding for full representation, while the State of Illinois [announced](#) additional funding for legal assistance

32 Governor J.B. Pritzker announced additional funding in [November 2023](#) for case management and other support services.

33 Given that this clinic launched right before report publication, WRC did not have a chance to evaluate its success or progress, but notes it is a positive development.

services in mid-November 2023. This funding is complemented by existing sources of [city](#) and [state](#) funding for immigration legal services.

### *City and State Infrastructure for People Seeking Asylum*

Chicago has an office dedicated to issues relating to immigrants, the [Mayor's Office of Immigrant, Migrant, and Refugee Rights](#) (Office of New Americans), and is a member of [Cities for Action](#). Shortly after taking office in May 2023, Mayor Brandon Johnson appointed a new [Deputy Mayor of Immigrant, Migrant and Refugee Rights](#). The State of Illinois participates in the [nationwide network](#) of 18 Office for New Americans offices dedicated to supporting and integrating immigrants at a state level through the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), which leads state immigrant-related initiatives.

As these and other city and state agencies and community-based organizations began responding to the needs of people seeking asylum who were arriving from the southern border, several city and state benefits already existed to help ensure the new arrivals' well-being and ability to integrate into the community. In addition to the state and city immigrant legal defense funds mentioned above, IDHS administers Victims of Trafficking, Torture or other Serious Crimes (VTTC) benefits, which are generally available to people seeking asylum and include health insurance and food and cash assistance. In addition, IDHS partners with the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR) to provide services and support to immigrant families through the [Immigrant Family Resource Program](#). Illinois residents without immigration status can obtain a [Temporary Visitor Driver's License](#), and City of Chicago residents can obtain a government-issued photo identification, [CityKey](#).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Media reporting [indicates](#) that high demand and limited city resources for the CityKey has led to some confusion and delay in access.



## Federal Funding for Supporting New Arrivals

Three of the four cities we visited—New York, Denver, and Chicago—received federal funds to support shelter and services provided to new arrivals seeking asylum. Under the purview of the DHS's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), until summer 2023 these funds were available to both nonprofits and to local cities/localities through FEMA's Emergency Food and Shelter Program - Humanitarian (EFSP-H). This program was then transformed into the [Shelter and Services Program](#) (SSP) operated in partnership by CBP and FEMA. In addition, New York City is one of two initial sites nationwide for the much smaller-scale [Case Management Pilot Program](#) (CMPP), a voluntary case management support services program for certain noncitizens in removal proceedings. Support services are provided by experienced community-based organizations and overseen by a board composed of non-governmental organizations and chaired by the DHS [Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties](#).

The former EFSP-H, now SSP funding is the primary source of federal funding for state and local governments as well as nongovernmental organizations providing reception services to people released by DHS at the southern border. Designed for short-term respite shelter and related services, it has historically supported [shelters at the southwest border](#) receiving people after release from CBP custody. As cities across the US began to welcome significant numbers of people seeking asylum arriving from the southwest border, EFSP-H/SSP became a critical tool for localities and organizations in need of support for the services provided to newcomers. However, because of its design for short-term reception needs—for example, limiting eligible services to those provided within the first 45 days of a migrant's arrival in the US—SSP has been inadequate to meet the [distinct, longer-term](#) funding needs of destination communities where people seeking asylum need to achieve stability while navigating complex and often lengthy immigration processes.<sup>35</sup> CMPP, on the other hand, is significantly smaller in scale and has only recently launched. Our report recommendations include calls for the federal government to establish varied and purpose-designed sources of funding to support the different stages and settings of reception of people seeking asylum.

### Shelter and Services Program (SSP) Awards to Featured<sup>36</sup> Cities and States

New York City	\$106,879,743
Denver	\$9,009,328
Colorado	\$1,635,258
Chicago	\$12,739,273
Illinois	\$19,366,204

35 The design and implementation of SSP has also created barriers for organizations offering shorter-term reception services, including along the US-Mexico border. In [July 2023](#), WRC joined with more than 70 organizations to express concerns about the ways in which SSP disregards key shelter needs and provide recommendations for improvement.

36 The United Way of Southern Maine was unable to apply for an unsolicited award opportunity available in the first tranche of SSP FY23 funding " [due to the program's burdensome requirements](#)."

## BEST PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES

### *A non-exhaustive list of best practices*

WRC was privileged to encounter many individuals and organizations in all four cities carrying out effective and compassionate welcoming work, so many that a full accounting is beyond the scope of this report. Here we highlight several best practices, both policy-based and programmatic, that are critical to uplift as people across the country look for guidance on how to improve the reception of people seeking asylum.

### Community-led case management support services

Case management support services use individualized need assessments to help people seeking asylum meet their basic needs and find stability in their new communities. [Evidence-based best practices](#) in case management have found that merely providing people referrals to organizations offering the needed services in question, whether medical, legal, nutritional, or other, is not effective in ensuring that people successfully meet their needs. Leading experts like the [National Association of Social Workers](#) call for those providing case management to accompany people through the process to make sure they get the help they need. As WRC has found in its years of [research](#) and advocacy on case management and [community support services](#), community-based organizations are usually the best positioned to provide effective case management, due to their preexisting community relationships and knowledge, often coupled with a mission-driven spirit to help.

As described in the previous sections, both Colorado and Illinois have capitalized on this special expertise of community-based organizations by funding trusted community-based organizations to provide case management support services to people seeking asylum staying in shelters. New York City's asylum seeker resource navigation program also empowers local community-based organizations to help new arrivals,<sup>37</sup> while the State of Maine partners with the City of Portland to fund case management services provided by Catholic Charities Maine on site in its [Asylum Seeker Transitional Housing Program](#). Thoughtful incorporation of case management services into short-term housing and shelter is especially critical and also creates efficiencies. In this way, housing addresses not only the immediate need for shelter, but can also ensure wraparound services to have other needs—such as access to medical care, education enrollment for children, and legal services—addressed at the same time.

*“A network of credentialed and trusted organizations on the ground [serve] as a pipeline for overcoming barriers.”<sup>38</sup>*

37 WRC's September 2023 brief [Welcoming and Supporting People Seeking Asylum: Lessons Learned in New York City and Portland, Maine](#) discusses the Archdiocese of New York's Catholic Charities Community Services partnership with NYC to provide community-based case management services.

38 All quotes are from interviews with stakeholders we met over the course of research for this report.



## School Integration for Children Seeking Asylum in Shelters

Many of the people seeking asylum arriving from the southern border are school-age children seeking safety with their families. As a result, public school systems in all four cities we visited are [working](#) to [welcome](#) new students with English-language learning needs, as well as histories of trauma and the challenges that come with precarious housing situations like shelters for the unhoused. Several stakeholders WRC spoke to not only detailed their endeavors enrolling children in school, but also lauded the efforts of their local public school systems in welcoming these children, while identifying the [need](#) for increased funding and resources to ensure that schools are adequately equipped to meet the needs of their new students.

### Rental assistance for people seeking asylum

All four states we visited have provided some form of rental assistance to people seeking asylum, drawing on best practices from housing policy that recognize the importance of giving people the transitional support necessary to move into permanent housing. Colorado and Illinois have provided dedicated funding for housing assistance for people seeking asylum. In both cases the state has contracted with trusted community-based organizations to complement their distribution of the rental assistance with support services helping people search and apply for apartments, sign leases, and obtain donated furniture. In Maine, rental assistance for people seeking asylum is part of the General Assistance program described previously, and is also delivered through public-private partnerships like [Project HOME](#).

One challenge that rental assistance programs have to contend with is the complexity of immigration processes and the time and resources someone seeking asylum generally must spend to get permission to work in the US. While recognizing that such programming can be challenging to states and localities struggling to balance costs, WRC is concerned by efforts to limit or end access to rental assistance programs, such as in [Chicago](#) as of November 2023.

Having a work permit is crucial to a person's ability to successfully afford to stay in their new home once the rental assistance period is over. For this reason, it is critical that rental assistance programs be accompanied by robust legal assistance programming, to ensure that people can move forward as expeditiously as possible toward getting their work permit (and pursuing the most appropriate immigration relief for their circumstances) while transitioning into permanent housing. New York State is seeking to address this challenge in its Assistance for Migrants Program (AMP) [asylum seeker resettlement pilot](#), in which eligibility for the rental assistance and other support services provided by the program depends in part on the individual or family having already filed their asylum application, making them eligible for work authorization.<sup>39</sup>

39 WRC's September 2023 [brief](#) provides further discussion of this pilot asylum seeker resettlement program, including support for the consideration of a refugee resettlement lens for welcoming people seeking asylum in general. As of late October 2023, only about [50 families](#) had been resettled into homes, while the program is funded to support 1,250 families. Media reporting indicates that some of the [challenges](#) are attributable to coordination difficulties between city and state actors, while others relate to the requirements that participating families have filed an asylum or TPS application putting them on the path to a work permit, a process to which many asylum-seeking families in NYC shelters have experienced barriers in accessing. Moreover, if a family has been able to obtain legal counsel to help them file an asylum application, they may be unwilling to abandon that counsel to move upstate.

## Private hosting programs for people seeking asylum

WRC was privileged to learn more about private hosting programs for people seeking asylum, where community-based nonprofit organizations and, in some cases, religious congregations establish a network of people willing to host people seeking asylum in their homes while they benefit from community-based support services. While the number of people seeking asylum that these programs can serve can be more limited given the nature of a model based on individual homes, the impact can be community wide, as hosts and other volunteers serve as ambassadors welcoming and integrating new families in need of protection into their local communities.

The private hosting model is used in varying forms around the world, including the private sponsorship promoted through the US-based parole programs [Uniting for Ukraine](#) and the parole processes for [Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans](#), as well as private hosting for Ukrainians in [Europe](#) and private refugee sponsorship programs in the [US](#) and [Canada](#).

In Denver, the [Colorado Hosting Asylum Network \(CHAN\)](#) focuses specifically on connecting people seeking asylum with hosts and host homes, coupled with a dedicated network of volunteers who supply community-based support services, including medical, mental health, educational, and workforce development. The program sets a hosting timeframe of around seven months, with benchmarks throughout the process ensuring that the hosts and volunteer support network foster the family's ability to live independently while pursuing their asylum case.

*“Asylum seekers have been through tons of danger and violence, and the host home model gives them a safe place to live and an opportunity to heal.”*

In Chicago, the [Illinois Community for Displaced Immigrants \(ICDI\)](#), [Sanctuary Working Group](#) and [Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago](#) run hosting programs similar to CHAN's, in collaboration with religious congregations, community-based organizations, and volunteers across the city and suburbs. In addition, the [Hyde Park Refugee Project](#) is an example of a hosting program originally designed to provide support to refugees—those who have been granted refugee status prior to arriving in the US—that has expanded its scope to serve people seeking asylum, including those paroled into the US.

## Innovative legal assistance delivery models for people seeking asylum

As WRC explored in its September 2023 brief [Welcoming and Supporting People Seeking Asylum: Lessons Learned in New York City and Portland, Maine](#), ensuring access to immigration legal assistance is an indispensable best practice to help newly arriving people seeking asylum achieve stability and independence in their new communities, as well as effectively navigate their immigration proceedings. Yet with the [lack of immigration lawyers](#) to meet demand across the US, local and state governments and the legal services community alike have pivoted to force multiplier tools like *pro se* assistance and limited representation in order to increase access to critical immigration legal services for new arrivals seeking asylum. Although these force multiplier efforts are necessary given the lack of sufficient immigration legal services capacity to meet the need of people affected by historic displacement crises, such limited representation models fall short of the critical support that full representation provides for the complexity of an asylum case and ever-changing US immigration policies and practices, especially rushed processes like those of the [Dedicated Docket](#) or [Family Expedited Removal Management \(FERM\)](#). Legal service providers must also contend with the need to ensure that community volunteers and organizations without immigration legal expertise receive the training, support, and information necessary to avoid any inadvertent misguidance of vulnerable people seeking help and make appropriate referrals to qualified legal service providers at all times.





While an exhaustive list of all immigration legal assistance delivery models is beyond the scope of this report, efforts that we saw include dedicated legal help centers, *pro se* assistance clinics, limited representation projects, specialized legal orientations and screenings in migrant shelters, and *pro se* tutorial video and documentary materials we described in the previous sections. In a promising recent *pro se* assistance clinic effort, USCIS [collaborated](#) with the NYC city government and legal service providers to initiate the processing of parole-based work permit applications on site,<sup>40</sup> later expanding those efforts to [Boston](#) and [Chicago](#).

*“One pro se assistance goal is to incentivize immigration judges to take a closer look at pro se cases.”*

In general, these programs help people prepare and file their applications for asylum and a work permit, as well as assisting with procedural requests like changing one’s address (especially important for people in [shelters](#) or other precarious housing situations) and court venue. With the administration’s recent redesignations of temporary protected status (TPS) for countries including [Venezuela](#) and [Afghanistan](#), these immigration legal assistance programs are [pivoting](#) to help people with TPS applications as well.

### State leadership and support for the reception of people seeking asylum

While the most consistent call for government support that we heard across stakeholders was for increased funding and coordination by the federal government, numerous stakeholders highlighted the critical role of state government in setting the tone of welcoming in rhetoric, funding, and policy. Even before Texas began sending buses to Chicago, Illinois had designated itself as a [welcoming state](#) that had extended certain key benefits to people seeking asylum as well as established [Welcoming Centers](#) across the state. Colorado pivoted its nascent Office of New Americans to facilitate critical case management and housing assistance services for people arriving and staying in the Denver area. Maine has not only partnered with communities like Portland and community-based organizations to provide shelter and support to people seeking asylum, but also initiated the [creation](#) of an Office of New Americans. New York has recently increased its funding for critical support services for people seeking asylum through initiatives supporting [case management](#) and [legal services](#), even announcing the creation of a [jobs portal](#) for people seeking asylum.

*“Leadership and vision are really important at the state level.”*

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40 On [October 26, 2023](#) a DHS spokesperson said that “[p]lans are in place to continue this effort once the city and state identify a location that can house this effort,” while on [November 2, 2023](#), a Biden administration spokesperson indicated that this effort would be scaled starting the week of October 30, 2023.

## State-Level Innovation: Oregon Expands Critical Supports to All Oregonians

Oregon has taken several steps in the past few years to support the health, well-being, and stability of all Oregon residents, regardless of immigration status. These new policies and programs give both community-based organizations and government officials, whether at the municipal or state level, a variety of tools to support people seeking asylum who are arriving at the Portland airport and elsewhere. These tools include funding for [universal representation](#) of people in immigration proceedings, the [Oregon Worker Relief Fund](#) for immigrant Oregonians facing eviction, extreme climate disasters like wildfires, and other crises, and most recently the expansion of [state Medicaid to all Oregonians](#) regardless of immigration status. The Oregon [Office of Immigrant and Refugee Advancement](#) plays a key role, together with leading community-based organization partners like the [Innovation Law Lab](#), in coordinating the implementation of these resources, including strengthening the connection between health, stability, and the ability to effectively participate in one's asylum case.

### Public-private partnerships to support people seeking asylum

Public-private partnerships were a best practice that we saw take multiple forms across the four cities we visited. We observed that public-private partnerships that provide support for people seeking asylum act as force multipliers, capitalizing on the resources, funding, and infrastructure of public agencies while harnessing the community trust and expertise of local nonprofit organizations. The partnership can then better design and tailor services for people seeking asylum in order to successfully meet their needs and effectively support them as they go through their immigration processes and achieve stability in their new community. While an exhaustive list of public-private partnerships is beyond the scope of this report, promising efforts that we saw include the community-based case management support—especially when integrated with housing, resource navigation, and rental assistance programs described in the previous sections.

While private for-profit organizations may sometimes supply operational capacity and resources for urgent larger-scale undertakings like shelters, these arrangements also often generated serious concerns, as described above in the case of the potential GardaWorld contract, for example. We found that community-based nonprofit organizations are critical to ensure that existing community resources and support are readily and effectively connected with new arrivals. These same local nonprofits also play an indispensable role in identifying gaps in resources and services and coordinating a community-based welcoming response to new arrivals.

This critical role of community-based organizations demonstrates the fundamental public-private partnership nature of any effective community reception of vulnerable people seeking asylum. Stakeholders across all four cities WRC visited were resolute on the importance of robust and transparent engagement by local and state governments with local community-based organizations. As described elsewhere in this report, such engagement and transparency can take various forms, including online dashboards, regular virtual or in-person convenings, and dedicated, public-facing government personnel, such as deputy mayors or Offices of New Americans. Lack of transparency or engagement by local and state governments can not only decrease the crucial support of local community-based organizations, but also impede the access of people seeking asylum to the community-based services that are critical to achieving independence and stability.



## Common challenges in reception of people seeking asylum

Although not exhaustive, here we outline several challenges to the effective and dignified reception of people seeking asylum that we encountered in the places we visited. As people across the country work to improve the reception of people seeking asylum, it will be critical to recognize, acknowledge, and actively address these challenges. WRC will provide recommendations on ways that federal, state, and local governments, as well as private philanthropy, can respond to these challenges later in this report.

### Shelters: Emergency rather than long-term solutions for community support

Housing policy has long recognized the [limitations of shelter](#) as a solution for unhoused populations, not least because shelters are designed for short-term stays to protect people from the risks of [exposure](#) and exploitation. It is admirable that cities have wanted to prevent people seeking asylum and who arrive without resources or connections from sleeping in the street, and unsurprising that they have turned to shelters in response. Yet the [affordable housing crises](#) in the cities we visited have made it difficult if not impossible for many migrants to move out of the shelters into apartments of their own. The lack of affordable housing is made even more difficult by the challenges people seeking asylum face in trying to get a work permit, which would enable them to obtain more [reliable and secure employment](#). What this reality has demonstrated is the necessity of support services tailored to the specific needs of people seeking asylum, with the goal of enabling them to achieve stability and independence in the community. Advocates in New York have called on the city and state to expand [housing voucher access](#) as another way to pivot from shelter to permanent housing.

*"If our people could get their work permits more quickly, that would simplify the process for so many...[they] could work independently, house themselves, be employed so they can feed themselves..."*

While shelter keeps people off the streets, shelter alone is not enough. Many people we spoke to, including government officials, acknowledged this reality. Yet setting length-of-stay limitations on shelter stays without providing people the support they need to obtain permission to work, find affordable housing, and navigate their immigration processes likewise fails to help people achieve stability and independence, instead leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and homelessness. For example, as NYC has begun to enforce length-of-stay limits in its shelters for people seeking asylum, attorneys and advocates have [raised concerns](#) about people's ability to receive critical correspondence from immigration authorities about their cases and pending applications, including for asylum, TPS, or work permits. As these advocates have noted, these shelter stay limits may have the effect of undermining concurrent efforts by New York City and State to help migrants apply for asylum, TPS, and work permits.

### Emergency response leads to procurement and sustainability challenges and transparency concerns

NYC, Denver, and Chicago have faced widely reported challenges in standing up and operating shelters for people seeking asylum, including concerns about the reliability and transparency of the often for-profit professional staffing companies contracted to establish and operate shelters. Some of these challenges are attributable to the nature of emergency response, where cities have had to quickly stand up shelters in order to prevent people from sleeping on the streets, which is a particular concern in cities with temperature extremes like NYC, Chicago, and Denver.<sup>41</sup>

41 Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker [observed](#) "It's very hard to have a contract with someone who can, on the spot, in an emergency, be able to deliver the kinds of things that these companies are able to do, and so that is an expensive thing...having a long-term, emergency-related contract is an expensive endeavor."

In NYC, that emergency response included emergency procurement, such as a \$432 million no-bid contract for migrant shelter operations to a COVID-19-era medical staffing company [DocGo](#), whose treatment of the people seeking asylum in its care, lack of relevant experience in sheltering and serving immigrant populations, and exorbitant rates have been [questioned](#) by community organizations, NYC Comptroller Brad Lander,<sup>42</sup> and state officials. While the DocGo contract has been a particular object of [scrutiny](#), not least due to the NYC comptroller's [disapproval](#) of the contract, both media reports and stakeholders WRC met with noted the [high personnel costs](#) associated with these staffing companies, where personnel are paid significantly more than local wages for similar work while lacking training and experience in working with people seeking asylum. Similar cost concerns in Chicago around the city's contracting of [Favorite Healthcare Staffing](#) led the new mayoral administration to [renegotiate contract](#) prices and encourage the company to [hire locally](#).

After operating its emergency migrant shelters with city staff, Denver [sought to hire](#) for-profit professional services company GardaWorld to organize and operate an emergency migrant sheltering program. This generated [concerns](#) due to GardaWorld's [involvement](#) in security operations, including immigration detention in Canada and its responsibility for [harmful conditions](#) at an Emergency Intake Site (EIS) for unaccompanied immigrant children in Texas. As we described in the section on Denver, [significant opposition](#) from community-based organizations led the city to drop this effort. Months later, Chicago announced that it had contracted GardaWorld to set up tent "base camps" to relieve emergency sheltering at police stations and airports. In responding to concerns about GardaWorld, Chicago city officials [noted](#) not only the need to move rapidly but also the [difficulty](#) in [finding](#) organizations with the capacity and resources to respond to large-scale emergency shelter needs.<sup>43</sup>

WRC heard similar concerns from a variety of stakeholders about the limited capacity and inadequate resources of often-smaller or even grassroots community-based organizations to engage in 24/7 shelter operations. However, given the crucial importance of the community ties and trust, as well as community-based organizations' experience and commitment to working with immigrant populations, WRC strongly supports efforts like the City of Chicago's recent [Request for Proposals](#) from community-based providers to supply migrant shelter operations and services, and we will continue to monitor its progress.

*"We don't believe that this will be the only time we need to serve new arrivals, so as we're looking at what is happening and preparing for what comes next, it is really important that we think through what is available to us and how we adjust."*

Although WRC did not evaluate shelter conditions as part of its research and monitoring, rapidly standing up shelters can lead to operational risks and vulnerabilities, especially where rapid response does not allow for sufficient training and procedural safeguards. This can leave shelter residents and staff vulnerable to harm, as well as putting shelter operations and therefore shelter residents' safety at risk—which occurred in NYC when the Fire Department of New York City [shut down](#) shelters for fire code violations, evicting residents into the street.

42 Comptroller Lander [noted](#) that "...if you don't keep paying attention to the system over time and you allow emergency procurement, even over an 18-month period, a two-year period, a period of years, to continue to drive inequities, you'll wind up with a lot of them."

43 City officials noted that local organizations only bid for 11 of the 15 [shelter sites](#) in the [Request for Proposals](#) for community-based providers, while also identifying "[other procurement restraints](#)" as complicating the city's desire to end its reliance on Favorite Healthcare Staffing.



## Serious challenges for legal service providers serving people seeking protection

The complexity of the immigration process poses a significant challenge to anyone going through it, especially people who have other vulnerabilities such as a lack of stable housing and employment. The procedural complexities and inconsistencies also complicate legal service providers' ability to help people through the process. Legal service providers in all four locations described routinely encountering procedural issues, whether stemming from incomplete or incorrect paperwork or faulty government systems, that required significant time and resources to decipher and resolve. This created burdens for full representation and *pro se* assistance<sup>44</sup> scenarios alike, in all cases reducing providers' capacity to help additional people in need of legal services.

Another external challenge faced by legal service providers relates to funding, whether public or private. Several providers noted that recent funding trends have been weighted toward programmatic rather than general or unrestricted funding. These trends have not only limited organizations' ability to maintain necessary administrative support, but also added administrative burdens to the legal staff carrying out the programmatic work, reducing their capacity to provide the programmatic services. Moreover, the programmatic focus has restricted organizations' ability to respond nimbly to emerging needs, whether external trends or individual client needs that go beyond any one program's parameters. Addressing emerging needs and long-term planning alike have also been hindered by the uncertainty generated by short-term funding, which leaves organizations at a disadvantage when trying to hire necessary staff.

*"No human exists in a neat package."*

## Community disinvestment and tension with new arrivals

Of the four cities WRC visited, NYC and Chicago in particular have seen more widely reported instances of community tension around the reception of people seeking asylum who are arriving from the border. While history demonstrates that past periods of significant immigration, like that to NYC in the [late 19th century](#), have also generated some local community opposition, some neighborhoods and communities have also cited historical disinvestment as the reason for their opposition to shelters and services for the new arrivals. This issue has been particularly salient in several Chicago neighborhoods where the city has sought to open migrant shelters.

An emblematic example is the Woodlawn neighborhood on Chicago's south side, where the city repurposed a shuttered public school building, formerly Wadsworth Elementary School, into a shelter for single adult migrants. The former school had been [sitting vacant](#) for years. Neighbors opposed to the migrant shelter [cited](#) the city's failures to invest in the lower-income, majority Black neighborhood, not least by closing its neighborhood public school and then failing to repurpose the vacant building for community use. In other neighborhoods, residents have [expressed concern](#) that using city park district facilities for shelters shuts down or limits community programming. In addressing these concerns, city officials have noted that existing city facilities are usually their main [option](#) for opening new shelter facilities.

Another source of community tension is that with existing immigrant communities, including long-term undocumented communities. WRC heard from several stakeholders about members of those communities expressing concern or even resentment related to their perception that new arrivals are

44 WRC discussed *pro se* assistance models for recently arrived people seeking asylum in its September 2023 brief: [Welcoming and Supporting People Seeking Asylum: Lessons Learned in New York City and Portland, Maine](#). 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.



getting more help than they did upon coming to the US.<sup>45</sup> It seems likely that the unique dynamics of this moment, with the **historic** Venezuelan displacement crisis bringing significant numbers of people without existing ties or resources to the US, affordable housing crises increasing reliance on shelters for the unhoused, as well as the effects of the Texas and Arizona busing campaigns, have made the arrival and the needs of vulnerable people seeking asylum more visible than ever.

### Incomplete coordination and support from the federal government

One of the most consistent challenges expressed by stakeholders we engaged with across all four cities was the perceived absence of robust support from the federal government, both in terms of funding and coordination. As discussed elsewhere in the report, particular flashpoints are the lack of coordination of the arrival from the border of people seeking asylum and the limited amount and utility of federal funding through the Shelter and Services Program (SSP). State and **local** governments and **civil society** have also called on both Congress and the administration to facilitate and expedite the access of people seeking asylum to temporary lawful status like parole and TPS and more importantly to work permits. **New York** and **Chicago** have called for the administration to make a **federal emergency declaration** in order to access additional federal funding and support, and have joined with **Denver** and other mayors to ask for coordination in the form of a **national decompression strategy** or a dedicated **national** or **regional** coordinator. In response, the White House and DHS have sent personnel to NYC and **Chicago** to observe and monitor the situation on the ground, leading to a challenging if substantive exchange **between** DHS and NYC about best approaches to the reception of people seeking asylum.

There has also been active exploration, at both the **state** and **local** level, of the possibility of taking **direct action** to expedite or facilitate work authorization for people seeking asylum, although these efforts face challenges in both the ability and capacity of the federal government to respond.<sup>46</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In spite of the challenges they faced, the strongest common theme that WRC observed in stakeholders across all four cities we visited was a welcoming spirit that people and institutions worked to put into practice day after day in service of people in search of safety arriving from the border. As many noted, the reception of people seeking asylum offers tremendous opportunity for both the newcomers and the larger community, not only in terms of economic and workforce opportunity but also in identifying ways to improve policies and conditions for vulnerable people in the community generally.

As this report lays out, there are numerous best practices that communities and policymakers across the US can draw from to better support people seeking asylum arriving in their own communities. Moreover, we urge decision makers at the federal, state, and local levels, as well as at philanthropic institutions, to incorporate these recommendations to ensure that this opportunity to make systems for people seeking asylum more effective, efficient, humane, and rights-respecting does not go to waste.

45 At the same time, multiple providers noted that having volunteers from existing immigrant communities provide services or orientations to new arrivals was an effective way of building bridges, not least because of the legitimacy existing immigrants have as messengers who have gone through the immigration process.

46 Both **Maine** and **New York** have introduced legislation to directly authorize state residents seeking asylum to work (although New York State Governor Kathy Hochul later **recognized** that this could violate federal law), while Chicago and Illinois have asked for significant public benefit parole determinations to enable the state to **sponsor** work permits for asylum-seeking and other noncitizen residents employed in critical industries. The topic has also been the subject of **nuanced discussion** in the Portland, Maine, mayoral race. Because work authorization is a matter of federal statute, the US government is **limited** in its options to respond.





## RECOMMENDATIONS: PIVOTING FROM CRISIS TO LONG-TERM MANAGEMENT

Perhaps most critically, WRC believes that policies, practice, and rhetoric around the reception of people seeking asylum in cities around the US require a fundamental shift in framing. Both the realities of ongoing displacement crises and the shortfalls of the response in cities across the US have shown the inadequacy of a “crisis response mode” that depends on people no longer showing up to seek protection here. Instead, as many stakeholders recommended, the US must understand and approach the arrival of people seeking asylum and other protection in the US as a long-term circumstance with ebbs and flows, and structure responses at all levels of government around sustainability and flexibility to shifting needs. A key resource for standing up a sustainable response should be [international humanitarian standards](#), which provide evidence-based guidance for sustainably, nimbly, and humanely meeting people’s needs in circumstances of displacement.

Another key aspect of the pivot to a long-term approach should be a comprehensive and actionable recognition of the intersectionality of the challenges in ensuring the basic well-being and safety of people seeking asylum as well as other community members. Thriving community members, regardless of background, are crucial to the prosperity of the community as a whole. While our recommendations focus on the reception of and support for people seeking asylum, policies should seek to improve outcomes for all people in need of support, irrespective of immigration status.

### State

- Provide leadership in welcoming and integrating people seeking asylum and other migrants through lawmaking, policymaking, coordination, and messaging and public communications. Key points of leadership should include:
  - » Governor’s office
  - » State legislature
  - » Office of New Americans or equivalent.
- Coordinate with institutions and organizations vertically and horizontally to ensure the responsive, sustainable, and innovative reception of people seeking asylum. Points of engagement and collaboration should include:
  - » Robust engagement and communication with the federal government
  - » State Office of New Americans network
  - » Communities receiving people seeking asylum
  - » Community-based organizations serving people seeking asylum.
- Strengthen and expand the role of the Office of New Americans to include policymaking and programming, and accompanying funding, for people seeking asylum or other protections.
  - » Establish and expand programming and funding for benefits, services, and supports directed at the safe, orderly, and dignified reception and integration of people seeking asylum and other protections in communities across the state.
- Ensure that funding provides sufficient flexibility to allow for service providers to pivot to emerging needs, as well as sufficient general, unrestricted funding for administrative support and overhead.
  - » Prioritize:
    - \* Household-based rental assistance and consider the creation of a Newcomer Voucher Program (further [detailed recommendations](#) from Church World Service)
    - \* Community-based case management support services

- \* Legal services funding for immigration and other legal needs of new arrivals.
- Adopt a whole-of-state approach that prioritizes engagement with and incentives for local communities throughout the state to welcome people seeking asylum, while ensuring that migrants retain autonomy in their choice of community.

## Local

- Provide leadership in welcoming and integrating people seeking asylum and other migrants through lawmaking, policymaking, coordination, and messaging and public communications. Key points of leadership should include:
  - » Mayor's office
  - » City council or equivalent
  - » Office of New Americans or equivalent.
- Coordinate with institutions and organizations vertically and horizontally to ensure the responsive, sustainable, and innovative reception of people seeking asylum. Points of engagement and collaboration should include:
  - » Robust engagement and communication with federal and state governments
  - » [Cities for Action](#), a coalition of nearly 200 mayors and county executives advocating for pro-immigrant policies
  - » Community-based organizations serving people seeking asylum.
- Pivot from homelessness to resettlement solutions for people seeking asylum and other protections, drawing on refugee resettlement models using public-private partnerships to facilitate people's ability to achieve stability and independence in the community.
  - » Establish and expand programming and funding for benefits, services, and supports directed at the safe, orderly and dignified reception and integration of people seeking asylum and other protections
  - » Ensure that funding provides sufficient flexibility to allow for service providers to pivot to emerging needs, as well as sufficient general, unrestricted funding for administrative support and overhead
  - » Prioritize:
    - \* Household-based rental assistance and consider the creation of a Newcomer Voucher Program (further [detailed recommendations](#) from Church World Service)
    - \* Community-based case management support services
    - \* Legal services funding for immigration and other legal needs of new arrivals.
- Engage the expertise of and community trust in community-based organizations providing services to people seeking asylum and other migrants by providing funding to and expanding the capacity of these organizations, as well as engaging them in planning and programming set up for migrant reception. Where useful, provide training and education to community-based service providers without significant experience serving migrant and asylum-seeking populations.

## Federal

### US Congress

- Led by Congressional appropriators, Congress must prioritize and substantially increase investment 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.



- » Funds should be flexible and grant-based, coupled with support to ensure that organizations that may have less or no experience with US government grants are able to seek their funds.
- » Lawmakers should expand their programming references beyond the Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP) and now the Shelter and Services Program (SSP), which were designed for the shorter-term emergency respite reception critical to the border context. While SSP and the critical welcoming services and infrastructure it supports continues to need sustained investment and attention, Congress must both increase SSP funding and expand funding sources to serve the longer-term needs of destination communities.
- » Congress should increase funding for the [Case Management Pilot Program \(CMPP\)](#), a promising pilot program that provides community-based case management services to support immigrants undergoing asylum and other case adjudication.
- » Congressional appropriators should also consider funding models like the case management for people seeking asylum pilot under HHS's Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) proposed in the Senate's Fiscal Year 2023 Homeland Security [appropriations bill](#).
- Congress should pass common-sense reforms like those in the House [Asylum Seeker Work Authorization Act](#) and the Senate [ASPIRE Act](#) to permit asylum applicants to seek employment authorization no later than 30 days after filing their asylum application. This will allow people seeking asylum to achieve independence more quickly, reduce reliance on local support systems, and better position asylum applicants to find legal representation to help them more effectively navigate their asylum cases.
- Congress should establish a Newcomer Housing Voucher program to provide direct assistance for people settled as refugees in the US, people seeking asylum and other noncitizen newcomers. While we intend to make more detailed recommendations on housing in the future, [Church World Service](#) has [detailed recommendations](#).
- Congressional appropriators should:
  - » Increase appropriated funding for USCIS—an agency that is largely fee-based otherwise—and provide explicit and detailed bill language requiring the agency to dedicate the increased funding to furthering efficiencies and reducing backlogs for asylum applications and related humanitarian applications like employment authorization, TPS, and parole;
  - » Decrease funding for immigration detention and instead dedicate funding to increasing capacity for ICE to process people who are not detained;
  - » Transfer funding previously allocated to immigration detention to HHS's ORR for supportive grant-based programming for the resettlement of and case management for people seeking asylum and for the expansion of housing assistance eligibility to all ORR-eligible populations, as well to FEMA for SSP and other community-based support for migrants;
  - » Increase Department of Justice (DOJ) funding for legal representation for adults and families in removal proceedings, as well as funding for legal orientation and *pro se* assistance programs like the [Immigration Court Helpdesk](#);
  - » Increase and expand funding for programs that support affordable housing and homelessness such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) Homeless Assistance Grants programs and authorize ORR to fund housing assistance for ORR-eligible populations;
  - » Increase funding for the McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program to [remove barriers](#) to education for all children experiencing homelessness, including children seeking asylum; and
  - » Allocate Title III funds for English Language Acquisition to ensure robust support of children and their families who are seeking asylum.

## The Biden Administration

- Establish and lead a whole-of-government approach to coordinating the safe, orderly, and dignified reception of people seeking asylum in the US. WRC supports [Human Rights First's](#) recommendation for the creation of a White House Task Force to develop, implement and lead a national coordination strategy, engaging not only key federal agencies such as the Departments of Homeland Security (DHS), Health and Human Services (HHS), Justice (DOJ), and Housing and Urban Development (HUD), but also state and local governments and civil society organizations.
- The Task Force's remit should include the use of administrative mechanisms to increase support and stability for people seeking asylum and other protection in the US, as well as for other noncitizen community members, whether extending parole, TPS, or other protections. This must include identifying ways to increase federal support for state and local resources, such as housing vouchers and rental, transportation, and school enrollment assistance.

## Department of Homeland Security (DHS)

The following recommendations for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) detail the various actions that DHS can take both immediately and in the medium and long term to make the immigration process more efficient and humane for people seeking asylum and other protections. These actions are critical to ensure the effective and orderly reception of people seeking asylum in communities across the US, where harmful or inefficient DHS policies and practices—such as processing complexities and backlogs for work permits— impact the community as well as the individual noncitizen.

- **US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)**
  - » Maximize Asylum Officer Corps capacity to better meet current national asylum adjudication needs.
  - » Further replicate and scale targeted efforts like those in [NYC](#) and under [Operation Allies Welcome](#) to facilitate application processes for high-demand benefits like work permits and TPS by locating USCIS personnel on site and empowering them to complete initial processing of fee waivers and biometrics.
  - » Commit to and achieve additional targeted processing reductions like those [recently announced](#) for parole-based work permits to expedite access to lawful status and employment authorization for people seeking asylum, such as TPS.
  - » Apply categorical fee waivers for employment authorization applications for targeted vulnerable populations, such as TPS-eligible Venezuelans and Afghans and people granted parole at the border.
  - » Eliminate the Asylum Employment Authorization Document (EAD) clock process in favor of making the process as simple and swift for asylum applicants as possible. WRC joined more than 100 other organizations in making [detailed recommendations](#) on policy and regulatory actions USCIS should take to streamline and expedite work permit processes.
- **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)**
  - » Together with CBP, ensure that future SSP funding opportunities prioritize community-based nonprofit recipients and [provide potential recipients](#) the opportunity to demonstrate need. FEMA and CBP should also [engage in close consultation](#) with shelters and local communities to identify ways to reduce burdensome reporting requirements and enable these front-line service providers to maximize their capacity to serve those in need.
  - » FEMA and CBP should explore opportunities to adjust existing funding sources for shelter and community-based support services for people seeking asylum to better serve the longer-term needs of destination communities, while growing and investing in funding and support for border shelters and communities providing critical respite services.



- **Customs and Border Protection (CBP)**
  - » From the August 2023 WRC brief [New Asylum Ban Leaves Migrants Stranded: Recommendations to Increase Access to Protection at the US-Mexico Border](#):
  - » Rescind the “Circumvention of Lawful Pathways” rule, also known as the asylum ban.
  - » Continue making much-needed improvements to CBPOne.
  - » Expand capacity at ports of entry to increase daily CBPOne appointments and facilitate greater access to those without appointments.
  - » End turnbacks by Mexican and US immigration officials of individuals trying to request asylum without a CBPOne appointment.
- **Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)**
  - » Increase resources and capacity for non-detained docket processing and reduce burdens for both ICE personnel and noncitizens through innovative reporting mechanisms like dedicated email inboxes and QR codes, ensuring any new mechanisms do not add to needless surveillance.
  - » Improve communication with those on the non-detained docket by standardizing, simplifying, and making public reporting requirements and the guidelines by which people can be escalated to more onerous forms of reporting or de-escalated to less invasive forms of reporting.
  - » Decouple immigration enforcement from case management by removing case management out of ICE. This includes the [Young Adult Case Management Program \(YACMP\)](#) that, as WRC and partners have found, actually undermines case management best practices in favor of expanded monitoring and surveillance.
  - » Support and invest in case management programming outside of ICE like the DHS Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties’s (CRCL) [Case Management Pilot Program \(CMPP\)](#) over any expedited programs that rush people through their cases without due process or support.<sup>47</sup>

## Department of Justice (DOJ)

- In order to alleviate confusion and potential errors in immigration case processing, the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) should work with USCIS to ensure clarity, consistency, and transparent communication with asylum applicants and their representatives about the jurisdiction, filing, and acceptance of asylum applications. It is critical that asylum applicants are not prejudiced in their ability to file their asylum applications and obtain employment authorization by agency processing errors and inconsistencies.
- EOIR should also terminate the [Dedicated Docket](#) and refrain from using other expedited docketing tools that target families with children and other people seeking asylum or other protection without providing sufficient due process safeguards such as access to legal counsel.
- EOIR should regularly consult with legal service providers operating *pro se* assistance services to identify and address systemic procedural and access issues in real time.
- EOIR should explore and request funding to expand its [Recognition and Accreditation Program](#) to expand access to legal assistance for people seeking asylum and other protections.

<sup>47</sup> WRC has serious concerns about the “community-based reception facilities” proposed by the White House in its [August](#) and [October](#) 2023 supplemental budget requests for Fiscal Year 2024. Reception facilities should never be operated or controlled by an enforcement agency such as ICE or CBP, and freedom of movement should never be restricted. WRC’s research on [European reception centers](#) found that such centers should be time limited for the purpose of processing, with the goal of people moving toward their final destinations within a few days to pursue their asylum case or other immigration relief and receiving referrals for continuing services, as needed.

## Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)

- The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) should explore and request funding for a pilot program to fund community-based support services for people seeking asylum, like the asylum seeker case management program proposed in the Senate's Fiscal Year 2023 Homeland Security [appropriations bill](#).
- Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) should expedite consideration and approval of state requests for Medicaid waivers that will increase access to healthcare for people seeking asylum.

## Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

- Explore ways to engage the [Continuum of Care \(CoC\)](#) program to provide housing assistance to people seeking asylum, including as a [bridge from SSP](#) or other FEMA emergency services funding.
- Engage and expand housing discrimination protections for noncitizens, including people seeking asylum.
- Increase and expand public and stakeholder education and engagement to ensure that landlords and property managers are better informed on the specific needs and eligibilities of people seeking asylum and other protections, including ORR-eligible populations.
- Increase and expand accessibility of low-income housing support programs for people seeking asylum and other protections, including improved and expanded language access.
- Designate headquarters and/or regional office personnel to coordinate efforts relating to people seeking asylum, refugees, and other noncitizen newcomers.
- Strengthen coordination with ORR and DHS to ensure a holistic response to needs of people seeking asylum and other protections.

## Department of Education

- Ensure responsive and adequate funding and distribution of [McKinney-Vento Act Homeless Education](#) state coordinators and local liaisons to schools receiving children seeking asylum who are staying in local shelters.
- Explore ways to expand and adjust programming under the [Office of English Language Acquisition](#) to meet the needs of local schools integrating children seeking asylum into their classrooms and local communities welcoming those families.

## Department of Labor

- Explore ways to expand and adjust programming under the [Immigrant Workforce Integration Initiative](#) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act to meet the needs of local communities integrating people seeking asylum into their workforces.
- Support state- and local-level efforts to integrate people seeking asylum and other protections into the workforce.

## Philanthropy

- Ensure that funding opportunities for direct services provide sufficient flexibility to allow for pivot to emerging needs, as well as sufficient general, unrestricted funding for administrative support and overhead. Funding that meets the needs of both community-based organizations and people seeking asylum themselves is indispensable to achieving long-term sustainability and success.
- Invest in the organizational structures and administrative functions of direct service providers to enable smaller or other community-based organizations to address the requirements for philanthropic and government funding.





## APPENDIX

For more information and resources, as well as for those interested in supporting the organizations with whom WRC engaged, the following list, organized by geographic location, is a great start, if by no means a comprehensive collection of all of the organizations and individuals welcoming people seeking asylum in these communities.

### **National/Other**

[Cities for Action](#)

[Innovation Law Lab](#)

[Church World Service](#)

### **New York, New York**

[Archdiocese of New York's Catholic Community Services](#)

[The International Rescue Committee in New York, NY](#)

[New York Immigration Coalition \(NYIC\)](#)

[Immigrant ARC \(I-ARC\)](#)

[Win](#)

[New York Legal Assistance Group \(NYLAG\)](#)

[Catholic Migration Services](#)

[Pro Se Plus Project](#)

[Artists Athletes Activists](#)

[Team TLC NYC](#)

[AID for Life](#)

[Project Rousseau](#)

[The Church of the Ascension](#)

### **Portland, Maine**

[Catholic Charities Maine](#)

[Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition \(MIRC\)](#)

[Greater Portland Family Promise](#)

[Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project \(ILAP\)](#)

[Hope Acts](#)

[In Her Presence](#)

### **Denver, Colorado**

[American Friends Service Committee Colorado Immigrant Rights](#)

[Colorado Asylum Center](#)

[Catholic Charities of Denver](#)

[Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network \(RMIAN\)](#)

[VIVE Wellness](#)

[Organización Papagayo](#)

[Casa de Paz](#)

[Lutheran Family Services Rocky Mountains](#)

[Metro Caring](#)

[Colorado Hosting Asylum Network](#)

[Denver University Sturm College of Law Immigration Law & Policy Clinic](#)

[The International Rescue Committee in Denver, CO](#)



## **Chicago, Illinois**

[Illinois Community for Displaced Immigrants \(ICDI\)](#)

[Bethany House of Hospitality](#)

[Viator House of Hospitality](#)

[Sanctuary Working Group](#)

[Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights \(ICIRR\)](#)

[Casa Michoacan](#)

[Hyde Park Refugee Project](#)

[Chicago4All](#)

[Latino Policy Forum](#)

[Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago](#)

[National Immigrant Justice Center](#)

[The Resurrection Project](#)

[The Legal Aid Society of Metropolitan Family Services](#)

[World Relief Chicagoland](#)

[Children's Legal Center](#)

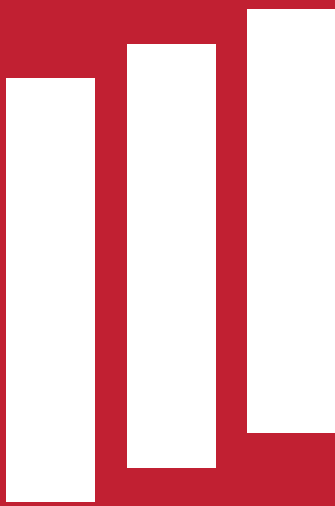
[Chicago Refugee Coalition](#)

[The Immigration Project](#)



## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CBP	Customs and Border Protection
CMPP	Case Management Pilot Program
CMS	Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services
CoC	Continuum of Care
CRCL	DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
DFSS	Department of Family Support Services (Chicago)
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOJ	Department of Justice
DOL	Department of Labor
EAD	Employment Authorization Document
EFSP	Emergency Food and Shelter Program
EIS	Emergency Intake Site
EOIR	Executive Office for Immigration Review
ERO	(ICE) Enforcement and Removal Operations
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FERM	Family Expedited Removal Management
GPS	Global Positioning System
HERRC	Humanitarian Emergency Response and Relief Center
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
HUD	Department of Housing and Urban Development
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
IDHS	Illinois Department of Human Services
MOIA	Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (NYC)
MRJ	Migrant Rights and Justice
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
NYC	New York City
OASO	Office of Asylum Seeker Operations (NYC)
ORR	Office of Refugee Resettlement
QR	Quick Response (Code)
RFP	Request for Proposals
SSP	Shelter and Services Program
TPS	Temporary Protected Status
US	United States
USBP	United States Border Patrol
USCIS	United States Citizenship and Immigration Services
VTTC	Victims of Trafficking, Torture or other Serious Crimes (Illinois)
WRC	Women's Refugee Commission
YACMP	Young Adult Case Management Program



**W O M E N ' S  
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Research. Rethink. Resolve.

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