

BECOMING WELCOMING COMMUNITIES

Immigration in Light of Biblical Faith:
A Study Guide for Wisconsin Congregations



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Refugee Resettlement 2000–2022

Refugee resettlement in Wisconsin and throughout the United States has been greatly impacted in recent years by several factors, including steep cuts to resettlement, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Afghan evacuation, and war in Ukraine.

From 2006 to 2016, Wisconsin saw a steady increase of refugee resettlement, from 330 in 2006 to 1,877 in 2016. These trends mirrored the nation as resettlement programs were expanded during the Bush and Obama administrations. The Trump administration, however, reversed that expansion almost immediately upon taking office. In early 2017, President Trump temporarily halted the resettlement program and revised the US resettlement ceiling of 110,000 to just 50,000, the minimum required by the Refugee Act of 1980. The ceiling was lowered further in following years, reaching a historic low of just 15,000 for 2021. These cuts resulted in Wisconsin going from 1,877 resettlements in 2016 to 585 in 2017 and even fewer in the following years. By 2020, Wisconsin resettled just 258 refugees, the lowest in Wisconsin since 2003.

Funding for resettlement agencies is tied directly to the number of resettlement cases, so these drastic cuts gutted the operational budgets and staff of agencies across the country and here in Wisconsin. Many resettlement offices closed or consolidated. In 2021, the Biden administration revised the resettlement cap from 15,000 to 62,500 and set the 2022 ceiling at 150,000. With so much damage done to the organizational infrastructure, however, it will take years to rebuild the system and approach such an aspirational number.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its negative impacts on housing availability, direct services, and employment and hiring added to the challenges of a system strained by the cuts of 2016–2020. Pandemic-related policies have also limited asylum cases. In March 2020, Title 42 was enacted by the Center for Disease Control under the direction of the Trump administration, allowing for the rapid expulsion of unauthorized border crossers and asylum seekers, citing COVID-19 concerns. From Title 42's implementation to April of 2022, Border Patrol carried out over 1.8 million expulsions, including 16,000 unaccompanied minors. The number of unauthorized border crossings actually increased as desperate asylum seekers saw no option after being turned away other than to try again. This policy virtually ended the process of seeking asylum within the United States. Although the Biden administration has attempted to end Title 42, it remains in place after court challenges.

After the US Military ended its 20-year war in **Afghanistan** in August 2021, 75,000 Afghan nationals were brought into the United States under Humanitarian Parole or with a Special Immigrant Visa. Humanitarian Parolees (numbering about 50,000) were housed and processed at military bases around the country until February 2022. Fort McCoy in Wisconsin housed up to 13,000.

By September 2022, 862 parolees were resettled in Wisconsin under the Afghan Placement and Assistance Program (APAP). Most were assisted by six resettlement agencies in Wisconsin. This enormous task was accomplished through tremendous effort by the agencies with support from the public, volunteers, and faith communities. While chaotic and challenging, the situation raised awareness of our resettlement responsibilities and capabilities, and increased interest among local communities to get involved.

The Russian invasion of **Ukraine**, beginning in late February 2022, led to one of the world's largest humanitarian crises with a third of the population displaced. After six months of war, about 6.6 million Ukrainians had left their home country in search of temporary refuge (not necessarily asylum). Since these Ukrainians are not refugees by legal standards (having not applied for asylum), the global and US response has required creativity. In the United States, the federal government created special programs and pathways to allow Ukrainians to enter the country without a visa and have temporary protected status.

In contrast to the APAP, Ukrainians are not being resettled by our agencies and cosponsors, but rather supported solely by citizen groups, families, and individuals acting as sponsors. Sponsorship is a binding legal agreement to provide for the entire financial needs of the sponsored individual/family for the duration of their stay. These Ukrainians are allowed to apply for work authorization, financial aid for education, and some basic government benefits for nutrition and health care. Some resettlement agencies are offering legal assistance to those in this special program.

The largest Ukrainian populations in the United States are outside of Wisconsin, so many Ukrainians entering the country are choosing other locations closer to friends and relatives. There are a number of sponsorship groups in Wisconsin, however, and this particular crisis has allowed an alternative model of resettlement to emerge. Where resettlement agencies must place clients within a 50-100 mile radius of their office, sponsorship groups can be anywhere. This has allowed congregations and community groups in smaller urban and rural areas to welcome and care for refugees.

Other countries, like Canada, rely more heavily on sponsorship than cosponsor cooperation with agencies. Given the recent decimation of American resettlement programs and their limited capacity to meet the needs of a growing global refugee crisis, sponsorship may become a greater part of US and Wisconsin resettlement in the future.

Sources:

See the Becoming Welcoming Communities Resource page (scroll to the end):
<https://www.wichurches.org/2023/02/bwc-resources-2/>