



# How to Enroll Children with Refugee Status in Head Start

Families with refugee status face unique challenges when they start a new life in a new country. Upon arrival in the United States, they have little time to become self-sufficient. For families with young children, becoming self-sufficient includes finding safe, reliable child care.

Assisting families with refugee status with enrolling children in Head Start and Early Head Start programs can help families overcome some of the challenges they face.

To identify families who may be eligible, connect with refugee resettlement agencies, which assign a case worker to each family. You can collaborate with the case workers to:<sup>1</sup>

- Identify eligible families
- Verify eligibility
- Get the necessary documents for enrollment
- Help guide families through the enrollment process

## Contact local refugee resettlement agencies

If your Head Start program is not already in contact with a local resettlement agency, you can [search for them by state](#).

## Determine refugee status

To properly support the unique needs of the refugee population, you will need to find out if a child and their family members are refugees. Sometimes, an individual might self-identify as an immigrant when they are, in fact, a person with refugee status. (There are legal distinctions between the two.) In some cases, a person may self-identify as a “refugee” when they are not one according to the legal definition.

You can independently verify whether someone has refugee status if they have one of the following documents:<sup>2</sup>

- Form I-94 with an admission code of RE-1, -2, -3, -4, or -5
- Form I-766, with code A03
- Department of Homeland Security Form I-571
- I-730 Approval Letter
- Visa 93 (or V-93) on the I-94 arrival/departure card



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## Overcoming barriers to enrolling children with refugee status

Head Start programs working with families with refugee status should develop a tailored approach to overcome the specific enrollment barriers that these families face. The following are enrollment challenges for people with refugee status and tips for how staff can address them.<sup>3,4,5</sup>

**Trust.** To encourage eligible children with refugee status to enroll in Head Start, it is essential for program staff to build trust with families. Parents who are refugees may be distrustful of enrolling their children in Head Start for a variety of reasons, such as concerns about leaving their children with someone they don't know and fears of persecution based on a lack of U.S. citizenship.

Your program can build trust with refugee communities by relying on liaisons with personal connections to those communities. For example, it is helpful to employ staff who are fluent in both English and the dominant language of the community your program is engaging.<sup>6</sup>

The Migration Policy Institute offers more information on trust-building in the article [Building Trust with Immigrant and Refugee Families: Spreading and Adapting 2Gen Working Practices](#).

**English ability.** Some families know and have studied English before they arrive in the United States, while many others must work hard to learn a new language. This means families may need help understanding what Head Start is, why they should enroll their children, and how to complete the enrollment process.

You can engage resettlement agencies for assistance with translation, interpretation, and completing paperwork. [Free translation and interpreting services](#) are also available for refugees.

**Cultural expectations.** Families' cultural beliefs about raising and educating children may be different from mainstream U.S. ideas. For example, parents may prefer to rely on family and community members who they already know and trust for child care. Also, parents with refugee status may be unfamiliar with standardized U.S. education requirements.

Work with refugee case workers to ensure that families know Head Start can prepare children for success in grade school. If your Head Start program employs a liaison for the local refugee community, involving the liaison will help build trust with the community. Families may also benefit from being told if there are children from their community enrolled in the program, which strengthens the idea that other families like theirs trust Head Start.

**Time Limitations.** When people with refugee status arrive in the United States, they are assigned a caseworker from a resettlement agency for just 3 months. This means parents who have refugee status have very little time to find work and arrange safe, reliable child care for when they are at work. This timeframe is especially challenging in combination with other barriers they face, like limited understanding of English.

With this limited timeframe in mind, consider an enrollment plan that communicates waitlist status to case workers of families with children who have been placed on the waitlist. Communicating waitlist status builds trust and empowers families to make the best choices for their children within a short period of time.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/FCD-Gross-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/FCD-Morland-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8HT2Z26/download>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/CSG-Trust-Building-Brief.pdf>

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## Ask for documents to determine family eligibility

Remember, it is against the law for Head Start programs to require proof of citizenship, a birth certificate, or a Social Security number as a condition of enrollment. But you may ask for certain documents to help determine the eligibility of a family with refugee status. Ultimately, it is important to check the Head Start Performance Standards for details about requiring enrollment documentation.

- **Proof of the child's birth.** Children with refugee status who do not have a birth certificate, passport, hospital record, or baptismal record should be allowed to demonstrate proof with other official government forms that contain their name, date and place of birth, as well as names of their parents.
- **Proof of income.** Everyone who contributes to the household income must provide proof of income over the previous 12 months. Acceptable documents can include income tax forms, W-2 wage and tax statements, pay stubs, and federal benefit documentation (TANF, SSI, SNAP). Families accepted into a program must prove that they meet the income eligibility requirements each year.
- **Proof of residency.** Acceptable documents can include driver's licenses with a current address, utility bills, lease agreements, rent receipts, and tax bills.

Note that families may be hesitant to provide documentation for a variety of reasons. For example, they may only have a single, original copy of important documents like birth certificates, passports, and baptismal records. To build trust, communicate:

- What you intend to do with their documents
- Why the documents are needed for Head Start enrollment
- That the documents will be handled with care
- That the documents will be returned in a timely fashion

## Reserving enrollment slots for children and families with refugee status who are experiencing homelessness

The new [Head Start Program Performance Standards](#) released in November 2016 include a provision [§1302.15 (c)] allowing Head Start and Early Head Start programs to reserve one or more enrollment slots (up to 3% of the funded enrollment) for pregnant women and children experiencing homelessness in their service areas for a period of 30 days when a vacancy occurs.

Children with refugee status may be classified as experiencing homelessness if they meet the requirements of a federal law called the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Act. Staff at your Head Start Center may wish to consider reserving enrollment slots for children experiencing homelessness under provision [§1302.15 (c)] so that they can be placed in those slots for immediate enrollment.



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