

*MSC 68th Student Conference on National Affairs*  
*“Hanging in the Balance: American Leadership in Global Crises”*

***Policy Proposal: R2C, Refugee to Citizen***

***“Helping the Huddled Masses”***

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## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Jennifer B. Higgins, Deputy Director, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)

**FROM:** Syed Ahmer, Kendra Alvizures, Caroline Campbell, Isabel Chavez, Christian Espos, Ernest Ellis, Erica Jantz, Jackson Smith, Jessica Smith, Ryan Torres

**SUBJECT:** An Abridged Timeline to Naturalization for Refugees in the United States

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### **Introduction**

Approximately half of the refugees in the United States forgo the lengthy and expensive naturalization process. As such, we propose an abbreviated route to citizenship based on employment in public service positions. We argue that our proposed policy change will facilitate naturalization, promote international collaboration in tackling the refugee crisis, and increase global resettlement opportunities.

### **Background**

Over the past decade, the number of displaced persons seeking refuge in another country has significantly increased. According to the American Immigration Council, 27.1 million people worldwide sought refuge in 2021,<sup>1</sup> largely due to conflict, persecution, natural disaster, or economic hardship. The United States has gradually lowered its ceiling for the number of refugees admitted per year since the 1980s. While the Biden administration has worked to reverse this policy by increasing caps on refugee acceptance, the current political and social climate towards refugees in the United States remains hostile.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, of the refugees coming to the United States, only 45% naturalize.<sup>3</sup>

There exist a multitude of reasons why refugees do not naturalize, including the complexity of the naturalization process, financial barriers, and lack of support. The citizenship process is often slow, bureaucratic, and expensive, making it difficult for refugees to access the support and resources they need. Moreover, the naturalization process can be costly and—combined with a lack of job opportunities for refugees—the dream of becoming a naturalized citizen becomes less attainable.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the United States should reprioritize and modernize the naturalization process for refugees to make it more efficient. By revamping its domestic policy, the United States stands to not only improve its international reputation but also demonstrate leadership in combating the worldwide refugee crisis by incorporating admitted refugees into society at a more readily available rate.

### **Analysis**

The refugee crisis continues to grow as countries' willingness to accept refugees declines, with many European countries becoming increasingly concerned about increased immigration.<sup>5</sup> Our policy recommendation reassures some of our strongest allies and refugee-receiving nations

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<sup>1</sup> "U.S. Annual Refugee Resettlement Ceilings and Number of Refugees," migrationpolicy.org, January 12, 2023, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-refugee-resettlement>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Poushter, "European Opinions of the Refugee Crisis in 5 Charts," Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, September 16, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/16/european-opinions-of-the-refugee-crisis-in-5-charts/>.

that continuing refugee resettlement is the best policy for the future. By creating an expedited path to citizenship for refugees, the United States demonstrates that it values refugees, setting a global example for other countries.

Our program is beneficial to refugees who intend to become citizens for a number of reasons, including:

- **A sense of security.** By becoming citizens, refugees are able to integrate into society and feel a sense of belonging in their new country without fear of deportation.
- **Economic stability.** Refugees that achieve naturalization earn higher average salaries through increased eligibility for well-paying jobs, particularly in the federal sector. Naturalized citizens earned 50% to 70% more in wages than noncitizens between 1993 and 2010. Conservative estimates that eliminate these differences find that naturalization is associated with a wage increase of at least 5% over green card status.<sup>6</sup>
- **Improved access to a range of rights and services unavailable to non-citizens.** These include the right to vote, the obligation to serve on jury duty, increased access to healthcare and education, and the ability to travel freely.

Increasing the number of refugees who become citizens through our program is advantageous to the country for the following reasons:

- **Improved national economy.** Since 2000, immigrants –including refugees– have accounted for 43% of the growth in the American labor force.<sup>7</sup> A 2016 case study on the effects of refugees in the Midwest on both state and local economies found that refugees are responsible for \$295.3 million in economic activity and the creation of approximately 2,000 jobs.<sup>8</sup>
- **Improved social cohesion, civic engagement, and patriotism.** By providing refugees with public service jobs, they will feel a sense of belonging in America and gain respect for the country. Moreover, we will see a higher rate of votes in elections and engagement in local civic events.
- **Resolved labor shortage issue.** On the basis that the United States is facing a number of labor shortages in a multitude of industries, new citizens with the skills we equip them with are needed to fill these positions and help address this issue
- **Diversified United States.** Citizenship brings people from different cultures and backgrounds into the United States, enriching the country’s cultural and social diversity
- **Improved international relations.** By speeding up our citizenship program, we will be able to increase the number of refugees we can take in. The United States will set an example to fellow countries, promoting global collaboration and increasing resettlement opportunities across the globe.

## **Proposal**

Our policy seeks to address the international refugee crisis by fostering a culture of refugee resettlement on the global stage. This policy allows the United States to lead by example.

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<sup>6</sup>“Fixing Our Broken Immigration System: The Economic Benefits of Providing a Path to Earned Citizenship,” Obama White House Archives (August 2013).

<sup>7</sup>Gaetano Basso and Giovanni Peri, “Internal Mobility: The Greater Responsiveness of Foreign-Born to Economic Conditions,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2020): 78.

<sup>8</sup>“Immigrants as Economic Contributors: Refugees Are a Fiscal Success Story for America,” National Immigration Forum (Summer 2018): 9-10.

The United States will show the world our reaffirmed position of prioritizing refugees through incorporating them into our society at a more efficient rate. Specifically, our program will offer a path to naturalization through public service work. Currently, permanent residents must live in the United States for 5 years before applying for naturalization, participants in our program would be eligible to apply after 3 years working in qualified public service positions. Qualified positions include those listed in the Public Loan Forgiveness Program as well as medical positions such as Certified Nurse Assistant and technicians. Fees will be waived in addition to the benefit of a shorter required residency period. In order to facilitate this policy USCIS would augment the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) so as to educate refugees on this opportunity and connect them with a database of work opportunities in their area.

We are aware that no policy proposal is perfect. The key concerns with R2C include:

- **A nonexistent international intervention.** While this policy addresses the citizenship pathway of refugees already within the United States, it does not directly support international refugee efforts. The international community is likely looking for a direct, international intervention from what they perceive as one of the most powerful countries.
- **A lack of financial support for refugees..** One of the main reasons refugees do not seek United States citizenship is the process' heavy economic burden. Expediting the naturalization application timeline also lowers the time that refugees can save for legal fees.

### **Conclusion**

Our policy opens the possibility that the United States can serve as a model worth imitating in how states should integrate refugees into their respective societies. We recognize that there are projected concerns but we believe this is the best route to promote assimilation, acceptance, and belonging. A path to expedited citizenship will increase refugee naturalization rates and subsequently create a more stable interconnected world.

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