

## World Refugee Day – June 20, 2019

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Imagine if you were forced to leave your home when you knew it was no longer safe to remain there. The mental and physical anguish you would experience of living with and re-living past atrocities. Enduring the lack of sufficient resources to provide essential human necessities for yourself and your family. Confronting the terrifying realization that your basic human rights are not protected in your home country. To many individuals living in the United States, these statements are inconceivable; unfortunately, they are reality for many people all over the world.



(Source: Public Health Image Library)

World Refugee Day is a day in which the world commemorates both the hardships and resilience that refugees experience. At the 1951 Refugee Convention in Geneva, Switzerland, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defined a refugee as, "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion." This ultimately paved the way for the Refugee Act of 1980, which established a legal and uniform basis for humanitarian admissions of refugees to the United States. The U.S. houses the world's largest resettlement program by welcoming more than three million refugees since 1975. Many refugees come from poor, unsanitary, or war-torn areas. It is likely that most, if not all, of these factors exacerbate one's vulnerability to disease.

The needs and health issues of refugees are diverse. Newly arrived refugees may have undiagnosed and/or untreated health conditions (e.g. diabetes, hypertension, giardiasis, mental health issues, etc.) due to the lack of public health resources and general medical care in their home country. Fortunately, initial health screenings identify many of these health concerns. The Virginia Department of Health operates the Virginia Newcomer Health Program, which mandates that local health departments perform these assessments. This program provides an initial health screening not only to newly arrived refugees, but also to other qualified individuals (i.e., asylees and special immigrant visa holders). The health screenings include lab work, blood pressure screening, ova and parasite identification, immunizations and referral to treatment.

Since June 2018, the Rappahannock Area Health District (RAHD) has screened 128 newcomers. The vast majority of this group have primarily been from Afghanistan arriving as SIVs (Special Immigrant Visas). These individuals have provided services to the American Forces stationed in Afghanistan and had to leave their country because of their aid to the United States. RAHD has also seen refugees from Swaziland and Ghana.

The refugee population is one of the most vulnerable populations in the U.S. Some of the challenges these people face include lack of exposure to American culture, language barriers, difficulty finding employment, raising their children in a new environment, and transportation barriers. As we mark this year's World Refugee Day, let us remember that today is a day to oppose the injustices occurring all over the world and reflect on our shared humanity.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

According to the National Immigration Forum, the U.S. received 85,000 and 54,000 refugees in fiscal years 2016 and 2017, respectively. The admission number decreased to 30,000 refugees in fiscal year 2019.

While asylees are people who meet the UNHCR definition of a "refugee," an asylee is considered to be someone already present in the U.S. or is seeking admission at a port of entry. A refugee, on the other hand, requests protection while they are still in their home country.

**To learn more about refugee health, please click on the links below:**

<https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/>

<https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/yellowbook/2018/advising-travelers-with-specific-needs/newly-arrived-immigrants-refugees>

<https://immigrationforum.org/article/fact-sheet-u-s-refugee-resettlement/>