

## **YOUR REBUILDING QUESTIONS ANSWERED**

### **A Conversation With Matthew Soerens and Jenny Yang - Transcript**

**Matt:** Hello everyone! I'm Matt Soerens, the U.S. Director of Church Mobilization at World Relief. I'm here with my friend and colleague Jenny Yang, who is the Senior Vice President of Advocacy and Policy at World Relief. We are here to talk to you all about what it means to rebuild the U.S. refugee resettlement program.

As many of you have already heard, President-Elect Biden has committed to raising the refugee ceiling to 125,000, which is a huge shift from the last several years.

Jenny, before we dive into the details, I'd love to hear your reaction to that number. What are you thinking? What are you feeling as you hear that number of 125,000 and as we head into this new year with this new possibility?

**Jenny:** I think it's an exciting thought to really believe that we can have a ceiling set for 125,000 because we know a lot of refugees who have been waiting many many years to be reunited with their loved ones in the U.S. and who are in really dire circumstances overseas.

I also think it's an opportunity to reestablish the U.S.'s traditional humanitarian leadership in the world because there really is no other country that has the capacity and the ability to resettle refugees like the United States. It's been ingrained in our policies and our laws since Congress, in the 1980s, set the refugee admissions program and really allowed the president to determine that number based on political considerations.

The fact is that we, right now, are facing the world's worst refugee crisis since WWII, where an estimated 80 million people are forcibly displaced, and around 30 million are refugees, the U.S. really has a moral responsibility, I think, to resettle a larger number of refugees than we have in the past several years. The potential for the us to resettle 125,000 refugees is really in line with our tradition of having done so at times of significant political conflict around the world.

And I also think it really is something that a lot of churches and volunteers are looking to partner with us on because a lot of folks that we know in communities across the U.S. are really eager to want to continue building friendships with refugees that are coming in.

**Matt:** That's fantastic. I know we've seen in the community where I live, a lot of churches that are really eager to start that rebuilding process.

I want to stop on some of the legal questions here because I know this is all super complicated. There are immigration policies that require congressional action, and there are others the president can do him or herself more unilaterally. What is the president's authority with the refugee ceiling?

Is this something, when he comes in, he can say a number but it's actually up to Congress if that's going to happen or not? So, who has the authority here?

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**Jenny:** Both the president and Congress have a roll. The president has the authority to determine the number. He's the one who basically signs on the dotted line the number that's recommended by the Secretary of State.

The Secretary of State and their team normally go through a process by which they study what's happening around the world and then they write what's called a report to congress in which they stipulate to congressional leaders, "these are the areas around the world in which we're seeing large refugee flows. and the U.S. should resettle these people groups from these areas."

Then they propose a number, at which point Congress then weighs in because Congress, after receiving the numbers, the relevant members of the judiciary committee are then supposed to meet with the Secretary of State to discuss the report. Then, after these consultations, the president gets that final number, and then he is supposed to sign on that dotted line.

So, the refugee admissions ceiling that the president signs is called the **Presidential Determination**, but Congress has a role to play, the Secretary of State has a role to play and the president ultimately has a role to play.

But it's important to note that congress has significant authority because not only do they consult with the Secretary of State, but they also are the ones with appropriations authority — which means they have the ability to fund the refugee program as well as fund the refugee assistance overseas for the majority of refugees have not been resettled, but who remain in refugee camps or urban settings around the world.

And I say that because it's important to note what role each part of the government plays because for a lot of us — as we weigh what we can each do to help and how we can provide support for even setting the ceiling at 125,000 — everyone should weigh in both with your member of congress as well as the president because both will and should be responsive to people weighing in supporting a refugee ceiling fro this fiscal year.

**Matt:** So, that congressional consultation process, if my memory is correct, usually happens right around the beginning of the federal fiscal year, which is in October. Obviously it's not October. Is there a precedent for an incoming president changing that ceiling mid-fiscal year. Is that something that can happen?

**Jenny:** Yeah. There have been times in history when the ceiling has been changed. President Clinton changed the refugee ceiling during his term to accept a lot of the Kosovo refugees that were coming in. So, it's not unprecedented for the president to change the ceiling, and he has the full legal authority to do so.

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But with the current ceiling set at 15,000 for this fiscal year, the president would have to write a new Presidential Determination, and there would probably need to be necessary consultations with Congress to let them know that this is what he's anticipating.

Then after that there would have to be a subsequent report to Congress, which would detail how the program is supposed to work. So, I think the challenge has been not just that the refugee ceiling for this year has been at 15,000, but the fact that the program was really changed significantly over the last several years where you have to meet very specific narrow criteria in order to qualify, and a lot of the refugees we traditionally resettle — Congolese, Syrians, Iraqis — actually many of them can no longer come through the program bc of these very narrow specifications.

In addition to the higher ceiling of 125,000, we also need a rewriting of the program so that the State Department can operate the program based on vulnerability versus these categories. The U.S. playing a role in accepting and resettling the world's most vulnerable refugees is a criteria that we want to maintain in the program and that's something we would need to change with a new PD as well.

**Matt:** And that's something that the executive branch — The President, the State Department -- have the authority to do?

**Jenny:** Yes, it's fully within the president's authority and that is something that we saw happen even under President Trump. He also changed the PD his first year in office in 2017. He changed the ceiling to, I believe 45,000. Any president has the authority to write an executive order to change the refugee ceiling.

President-elect Biden did commit to changing it to 125,000, and we're hoping he'll follow through with that commitment.

**Matt:** I'm not a mathematician, but 125,000 many times over 15,000. Can you give us a sense, in terms of historical perspectives — is 125,000 a historical high for the US refugee program, or where does that fit into history?

**Jenny:** 125,000 would be the highest refugee ceiling since the late 1990s. But I think given the humanitarian crisis we're facing right now with a record number of those displaced, it's not unusual to set a number that high. When you look at the history of the program, which started formally in 1980 with the passage of the Refugee Act, there have been really high refugee ceilings that were set. For example in 1980, the ceiling was set at 231,700. And then the year after it was set at 217,000 and then 140,000.

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When you look at what was happening in the early 1980s, there was this huge outflow of refugees coming from Vietnam. The ceiling was set that high because the U.S felt, at that time, a big obligation to resettle a large number of refugees.

Then you also see in 1993, the ceiling was set at 142,000 as well. These were several years in which the ceiling was set above 125,000, and so I think the U.S. setting the ceiling for 125,000 for 2021 would be really a step in the right direction given everything that's happening around the world.

Obviously it will take a lot of work for us to rebuild back the program, but it does set a goal that I think is not only achievable but is really a right moral direction for our country in recognizing that given what's happening around the world that we do have an obligation to respond according

**Matt:** So, I think some people hear that 125,000 figure and are very excited to hear the U.S. returning to a role of leadership. While some others might think, "Wow that sounds overwhelming!"

**And of course, it's not as simple as everyone arriving the day that this is signed. So, can you talk about what the process is. When do the number of refugees arriving in various communities around the united states actually begin to increase, and what are these steps that need to happen before that is possible?**

**Jenny:** Yea, so that's a great question. Again, I think the setting of the refugee ceiling is just the first step in the right direction. So you have to set the ceiling saying this will be our goal for this year, but it will take commitment and resources for agencies like World Relief in partnership with the State Department and others and volunteers and networks with churches to really build back the program because over the past several years, World Relief had to close several offices in communities that had long standing relationships the refugee community, and that were willing and wanting to resettle more refugees.

So, not only in the offices that we currently have would we need to rehire more staff, make sure that they're trained and ready and willing to receive a larger number refugees but we would also have to consider whether or not there are certain cities across the U.S. that are wanting to have refugees come in partnership with World Relief, and what would it look like with World Relief to reopen some offices either that we have closed or that we haven't had an office before.

I think it is going to take a lot of effort from World Relief and other organizations with the State Department to identify what are the core needs that we have and how do we get the appropriate resources to make sure that we have the right staff and networks available and resources to really serve the refugees well.

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And so I don't really think, even within the first year, even with the ceiling set at 125,000 that we're going to see that number. I think it will take us slowly rebuilding the program on the domestic side. But also when you look at overseas processing, a lot of what we call circuit rides where security officers are trained to interview refugees, a lot of that has stopped right now. So, we would need to reschedule those circuit rides, process all the cases, and a lot of that could take months, if not years. So, if you look at the pipeline right now, we have a lot of refugees that are waiting. But then we need to restart the processes over again, and that's gonna take time as well.

So, both on the overseas processing front as well as on the domestic infrastructure front, on both of those sides we need to do a lot of restarting and rebuilding to make sure we can be in a place where we can reach the 125,000.

**Matt:** That's really helpful to lay out all those different pieces that need to come into place.

**On the idea of rebuilding infrastructure for resettlement in the United States, can you speak to some of the factors that World Relief or other resettlement agencies, but specifically for World Relief, What factors are we considering as we look at potential new locations to begin refugee resettlement where it hasn't been happening the last few years?**

**Jenny:** Yeah, well we are in 17 locations across the U.S. A lot of them have been there for many many years. But as we look to rebuild in the U.S., I think one of the key questions we are asking is, not only is there affordable housing as well as a good job market for refugees to be placed in good employment opportunities, but whether or not there's a strong church community that can actually partner with us in resettling refugees.

And so a lot of the things we're doing and the exercises we are undergoing at World Relief is — are there several churches, three-to-four even, who have been wanting World Relief to open an office there, and can they work and partner with us to set up Good Neighbor Teams, which are teams that help refugees when they first arrive finding an apartment and finding jobs and learning English and just befriending refugees in general when they first get here.

These are the questions that we ask. So, I think we would really only open an office in area where we felt strong community support where there are pastors and churches who are willing to help these refugees as well as strong employment opportunities as well as schools and housing that would be willing to welcome a lot of them.

In our experience, we've found that in most of these communities that we work in, there has been strong community support, but it does require ongoing education and communication, and

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we find that when a volunteer works with a refugee, it is absolutely transformative for the volunteers. And for the refugees too, but it's really these life-changing relationships that we want to continue to have in our world because we know the impact these relationships can have on churches and ministry in general. So, those are the things we will look for as we seek open some offices in new communities.

**Matt:** So of course the wild card in everything in the last year is COVID-19 and the public health dynamics. How does that play in both resettlement and overseas processing? How does COVID-19 affect getting refugee resettlement to a historically normal level?

**Jenny:** This was a huge consideration just in 2020. The refugee program was suspended except in emergency cases pretty much from April to July, and then it was late summer when we resumed the program with specific COVID precautions in place.

So, for any refugee that's arriving in the U.S., or even processing when they were checked for medical conditions, they would actually have to quarantine in the United States. Mind you, in some of these places where these refugees are coming from, COVID is not as rampant as it is in the U.S. Even still, once the program resumed in late summer of 2020, all refugees had to undergo COVID testing overseas, and once they get to the United States, then there's a 72 hour period after that test that they're able to travel to the U.S.

So, I think a lot of the public health and concerns that we would have for anybody is certainly applicable when we talk about refugee processing, but I think our government is taking all the necessary steps that refugees are COVID free and symptom free when they arrive to the U.S., and then even after that, they have to quarantine when they get here. And so it is a pretty safe process and I think it will continue to be safe as we expect to see more refugees coming in in the near future.

**Matt:** As we see the refugee program rebuild, hopefully that will coincide with the decline of COVID-19 being our everyday reality that we all need to think about all the time.

**Could you speak to, for Christians who care about refugees, who want to see the U.S. return to a higher historical level of refugee resettlement, how do we use our voices to hold our government accountable to that? What can we practically do?**

**Jenny:** First and foremost it's important to be informed of what's going on. The fact that your listening now to this audio, perhaps you're following World Relief on social media or subscribed to our newsletter, those are all important steps to continue to be aware of what's going on

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because I think in the day-to-day there are significant changes to the program and it's important to be aware of in general.

But I also think it's important to engage our local communities in being aware of refugees and what's happening around the world. As we see a ramping up in the program, you may start to see a rise in the number of refugees in your community, and I think the main question is — how will my church or community engage? Can my church be a welcoming community for refugees that are coming in and that requires ongoing conversations with your team of volunteers at your church, even conversations with your local pastor to talk with him or her about tangible ways the church can help welcome those who are coming in.

And so we've seen a lot of churches reach out to local offices to set up Good Neighbor Teams to make sure volunteers are ready and trained, to make sure they're ready to welcome refugees at the airport, but a lot of that this also meant having tough conversations with a church about what is a theological positioning on refugees. We've worked with a lot of pastors who have preached about what migration from the pulpit not necessarily as a political issue, but a theological issue and at World Relief have resources to help churches be able to do that.

We also have churches do small group curriculum that you and I have co-written — Welcoming the Stranger. We have a guide to go along with that. The Evangelical Immigration Table has the I Was A Stranger Bookmark Challenge where people can read through 40 verses related to immigration in the Bible, using a bookmark and have that guide people's response theologically as well. So there's a lot of resources that can help people build the Biblical framework necessary to engage on topics related to migration.

I would say the last thing, in addition to being informed and engaging your local church theologically, is really to engage in advocacy, and advocacy means to speak up for those who are oftentimes considered voiceless. And for us at World Relief that has meant equipping you all to contact your members of congress.

If you go to [worldrelief.org/advocate](http://worldrelief.org/advocate), you can directly reach your member of congress through emails and telephone calls and once you do that you can formally register your thoughts to your member of congress. Especially in the beginning of a new presidential term it is critically important for your member of congress to know what you care about because when we don't speak up, there is a vacuum of values that I think are needed to inform our conversations and our members of congress are really looking to you to know what they should prioritize. If you don't say anything at all, they will oftentimes look at other things or not even know that refugees are coming into their local communities. So, speaking up is critically important because it helps not just shape public narrative, but public policy, And that will really set the agenda for whether or not we have a robust refugee resettlement program and whether or not more people around the world can get the protection and assistance they need.

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**Matt:** That's so good. I think it's so important. Now is the time to do that advocacy so we can be rebuilding the infrastructure.

Is there anything else you would say? I think a lot of the folks listening are connected to anWorld Relief office or are hoping a World Relief office will open near their community once refugees start arriving in more significant numbers. Is there anything else we can be doing now to lay the groundwork for that?

**Jenny:** Just reaching out, as you were saying, to one of our local offices to see if there are volunteer opportunities. I think with COVID there are now opportunities to volunteer virtually so you can really be anywhere and work with the people we serve online. So, it's really been an incredible opportunity to be at home, but still make meaningful change with refugee and immigrant communities across the country.

But the other way folks can engage is through what we call [The Path](#), which is a community of givers who plug into World Relief and make a monthly donation to the work we continue to do. This community is so important because it really allows World Relief to spend our resources where it's most needed to continue to resource our local offices with the services that we know refugees and immigrants need — especially during covid. It really allows our response to remain nimble and flexible, especially in light of emerging challenges.

So I would encourage the people to continue partnering with World Relief through volunteering and giving because both are critically important in this new season. And I think just in general to continue praying for World Relief and our staff. We have staff around the world that continue to work in extremely difficult circumstances that are really on the front lines of sharing public health info and making sure people have the resources they need to respond well.

So praying for our staff, praying for refugees and the people we serve on a daily basis is something that's very important. All of those things would be welcome partnerships that we can have with anyone who is listening.

**Matt:** Fantastic. Well, thank you so much for giving us such a great overview. I know I'm excited for things to start looking a little bit differently when it comes to refugee resettlement, and I know many many others around the country are as well. So it's been great getting this update, and we'll stay in touch with people as we watch the program rebuild over the months to come.

**Jenny:** Awesome. thank you matt!



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