

Portland

As Portland surges with newcomers, here's a look at the process of seeking asylum and why it's different this time





Filipe, an asylum seeker who arrived in Portland earlier this week.

Robbie Feinberg | Maine Public

By **Nick Schroeder**, BDN Staff
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As of Friday afternoon, a total of 177 migrants have arrived in Portland. Thursday night, 157 stayed at the Portland Expo, and 20 more arrived on buses from San Antonio Friday morning. Since arriving on Sunday, 41 have also left, according to the city of Portland, possibly headed for Canada.

With the unexpected arrivals and more on the way, it's worth a refresher on the refugee experience and process, from the perspectives of both the state and migrant.

Why are these migrants so heavily concentrated from Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo?

Briefly, since horrifying political violence in the central region of Grand Kasai ramped up in 2016, the Democratic Republic of the Congo has become **one of the most conflicted regions in Africa**. Food and nutrition experts estimate that 7.7 million people are food insecure, a 30 percent increase from 2017. A cycle of violence, disease and malnutrition has led to increased calls for international aid, and a 2018 UN report cited that 13.1 million citizens require humanitarian assistance — 60 percent of that figure are young people 18 and under. The situation is extremely dire.

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PORLAND, MAINE -- 06/14/19 -- Governor Janet Mills (left) and U.S. Rep. Chellie Pingree (right) meet with members of the public and other stakeholders in Portland on Friday to discuss how to respond to the hundreds of asylum seekers now arriving in the city. Troy R. Bennett | BDN

Why are they coming to Portland?

After traveling to Mexico through Central America, the asylum seekers are processed and released at the border by U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Catholic Charities, Archdiocese of San Antonio expects to see around 300 Congolese migrants per week released from the border and to San Antonio for the next couple of weeks, **according to the Rivard Report**. Once there, shelter workers assist migrants with their travel plans and purchase them bus tickets if needed. Catholic Charities, Archdiocese of San Antonio **has been spending around \$13,000 a week on bus tickets for asylum seekers to continue their journey.**

For the migrants currently arriving in Portland, many have sought the city out specifically because of the vibrant immigrant community that has already taken root and for the city's reputation for supporting refugees, **according to the Portland Press Herald.**

What does the refugee process entail?

Incoming asylum seekers face an intense vetting process that can last as long as two years. According to information from the National Immigration Forum, individuals seeking asylum at ports of entry are subjected to a “credible fear screening interview” by asylum officers. Here, the applicants explain how they have been persecuted, or why they have a “well-founded fear” of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion if they returned to their country.

Typically, asylum seekers who arrived here have already passed the first step of that test, and CBP officers have deemed them as having a “significant possibility” of being eligible for asylum at a future interview. These folks probably haven’t.



A volunteer at the Expo Building plays with children and folds paper airplanes.

What's the difference between a refugee and an asylum seeker?

This one's confusing, and especially so with this recent surge.

An asylum seeker is typically, by definition, already a refugee. The folks who arrived in Portland this week are in a process called "defensive asylum," which means they're asking for defense against removal after being apprehended by federal agencies such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection. By contrast, "affirmative asylum" is when a refugee is already within the country, on a visa or otherwise.

But in this case, the migrants arriving this week have no legal refugee status. Refugees are resettled by the federal government and have legally protected status upon arrival. But that didn't happen here. They were simply sent to Portland from San Antonio, and will be beginning the asylum-seeking process here.

Of course, the precise criteria for seeking asylum is tough for a native English speaker to grasp, let alone from the perspective of a person seeking asylum, who might not have a strong command of English. A lot of times, migrants won't be able to articulate their situation or understand whether they qualify for asylum until they talk with a lawyer, like one from Portland's Immigration Legal Advocacy Project.





City officials say the cost of opening the emergency shelter, which is mostly for staffing, is still unclear.

Julie Pike | Maine Public

Why is this happening now?

Since it's been a guiding philosophy of the Trump Administration to reduce the number of immigrants allowed into the country, there's been an incredible build-up of migrant families at the southern border. Simply put, the dam has begun to break.

That's the broader reason, but another more precise one has to do with Mexico. President Trump has pressured new Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who took office in December, to reduce the number of migrants entering the U.S. As a response, Mexico issued **temporary humanitarian visas** to Central American migrants already in Mexico in an attempt to slow the passage of migrants north.

This backfired. Mexico's visa program was reportedly "too successful," leading it to shut it down in January. But American officials believe that word of the

program had encouraged even more passage from Central America toward Mexico, and once news spread of the program's end, those migrants continued north, colliding with a **backlog of more than 800,000 people** seeking entry into the U.S.

Where will the migrants go from here?

There is an offer to transfer the migrants from the Portland Expo building to a dorm at the University of Southern Maine's Gorham campus, which USM President Glenn Cummings said could be used as a shelter until August 7, **WGME reported.**

Taking the longer view, it's not yet clear. Maine received a surge of Congolese refugees in 2016, and the result was a spike in resettlement in the French-speaking Lewiston-Auburn region. Local resettlement organizations say it's too soon to tell in this case, but it's reasonable to expect something similar here.

During 2013-16, the second Obama administration, **an average of 448 primary refugees resettled in Portland, Lewiston and Augusta** per year, with a high of 623 in 2016 alone. That figure has dropped substantially during the Trump era, with 323 refugees integrating in 2017 and only 66 last year.

Refugees can become citizens after five years of legal residency in the U.S. They must first apply for permanent residency after one year of living in the country.

After that, they have the same legal rights as you and I, including voting rights.



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Mufalo Chitam, executive director of the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition, is coordinating community volunteers at the emergency shelter setup for asylum seekers at the Portland Expo. Many of her volunteer cooks and translators are also immigrants, from the countries the newcomers are from. Chitam was born, raised and college educated in Zambia. She moved to Maine in 2000.

How does this affect the community?

Typically, migrants who get as far as Maine have already passed through some parts of the defensive asylum process, and would have corresponding benefits. The migrants who are arriving now are beginning that process anew. For that reason among others, the situation is considered a sort of emergency — the city doesn't have support systems in place for this situation, and, it must be said, this situation has largely come about as a result of the Trump administration's political motivations for preventing legal immigration.

Because they don't yet have legal status, these migrants aren't eligible for services they'd normally get, which is why we're seeing organizations such as Preble Street, University of Southern Maine and Greater Portland Health volunteer services, along with a slew of individual donations. In Portland, City Manager Jon Jennings said that the city is looking to mitigate the dependence on taxpayer funds as much as possible. Where applicable, services would pull from the General Assistance program as opposed to the city's Community Support Fund,

which was implemented in 2016 and **just survived** the city's latest budget after an outpouring of public advocacy.

Once they attain asylee status, the migrants are eligible for services from Catholic Charities, which took over for the Office of Refugee Resettlement in 2017. Once they are granted asylum, they will be eligible for employment case management, cash assistance, medical assistance and medical screenings. Catholic Charities is funded partly through the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement and the State Department, plus charitable donations. The Maine office says it doesn't have adequate funds for this influx of asylum seekers, but it's working with the city **to provide volunteers for interpreting services, and for consulting on cultural sensitivity training.**



Portland Mayor Ethan Strimling speaks at a meeting in Portland on Friday to discuss how to respond to the hundreds of asylum seekers now arriving in the city.

Are refugees a drain on the economy?

Not really. Per Catholic Charities, “the economic impact of refugees on local communities is very small. Refugee Resettlement is a federal program designed to temporarily host refugee families while they transition to self-sufficiency. Because the program is only partially funded by the government, RIS depends on local volunteers, in-kind support, and cash donations.”

By and large, refugees and other migrants integrate into the community.

According to figures obtained from the City's Office of Economic Opportunity, foreign-born residents in metro Portland (which includes York, Cumberland and Sagadahoc counties) contributed \$1.2 billion to the metro area's GDP in 2016, paying \$62 million in state and local taxes.

The arrival of new immigrants also fits squarely into the needs of the state, **which faces challenges from an aging population**. The state's Department of Labor predicts Maine will add 14,000 new payroll positions by 2022. That number comes on top of another 109,000 positions to be vacated by 2032 due to **a gap between the number of older workers set to retire and the lesser number of younger Mainers coming of working age**.

So yes, Portland's new arrivals have presented a challenge. It's urgent, but it's not dangerous, and citizens and organizations are rising to the occasion.

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