



U.S. Citizenship  
and Immigration  
Services  
*Office of Public Affairs*

## **Refugee Affairs Division Chief Ruppel Remarks Ethiopian Community Development Council 25th Annual National Conference**

**Date:** May 2, 2019

**Time:** 8:45 to 10 a.m. Eastern

**Location:** Holiday Inn Hotel and Suites, 625 First St., Alexandria, Virginia 22314

On Thursday, May 2, 2019, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) participated in the Ethiopian Community Development Council 25th Annual National Conference: Building Resilient Communities for Refugees.

Joanna Ruppel, chief of the USCIS Refugee Affairs Division within Refugee, Asylum, and International Operations, delivered remarks as part of a panel discussion. Other panelists included Carl Rubenstein, director of the Division of Refugee Assistance, Office of Refugee Resettlement at the Department of Health and Human Services; and Larry Bartlett, director of the Refugee Admissions Office, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration at the Department of State.

Below is a summary of the USCIS panel remarks.

**Please note that some information about refugee processing may have changed since this panel presentation. Visit the [Refugees](#) page on [uscis.gov](#) for the most up-to-date information.**

### **Chief Ruppel's Remarks**

- Good morning. It is a pleasure to be here with my esteemed colleagues from Department of State and Department of Health and Human Services.
- Thank you for having me on the panel today. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services once again welcomes the opportunity to give an update on the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) as it relates to our part of refugee processing.

- Today, I thought I would provide a quick summary of processing last year and an operational update on where USCIS has focused its efforts this fiscal year and what we can expect for the remainder of the fiscal year.
- As you may recall from last year's updates, in FY 2018 there were a number of enhancements introduced to the program. These measures were the result of two reviews of the program under Executive Orders and are part of a longstanding practice to prioritize integrity in the program. Since the inception of the program, USCIS and other processing partners have consistently reviewed the USRAP and implemented enhancements to its security vetting and program integrity in order to carry out the mission and safeguard the United States.
- As you saw last fiscal year, the implementation of new security vetting procedures, while necessary, did lengthen processing times for some cases and slowed admissions.
- Additionally, we noted that the U.S. government was taking into account its humanitarian response to protection needs as a whole, both overseas and domestically. This includes both our domestic asylum program and refugee resettlement.
- In recent years, the number of people seeking asylum in the United States has grown significantly. The United States is facing a very large backlog domestically in adjudicating asylum claims. This is the result of two factors: a very dramatic increase in newly filed asylum cases, as well as our need to deploy asylum officers to the border in order to screen new arrivals instead of adjudicating affirmative asylum cases. Because individuals in the credible fear screening process are detained while they await their interviews with USCIS, USCIS has prioritized these cases for the last several years.
- The way for USCIS to quickly augment resources to our asylum priorities was to temporarily assign refugee officers to domestic duties with the asylum program.
- This fiscal year, as the Asylum Division has been able to increase its own staff, the Refugee Affairs Division has decreased the number of staff detailed to the Asylum Division. As a result, we have been able to conduct more refugee interviews abroad. Additionally, we have seen an increase in output from some of our vetting partners.
- In the first half of the fiscal year, USCIS staff traveled to 44 countries to interview over 26,000 refugee applicants.
- In Africa, we interviewed in 15 countries, specifically Algeria, Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, Malawi, Morocco, Niger, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Approximately 63% of our interviews have been conducted in Africa this fiscal year.

- Our top three nationalities interviewed worldwide this year to date are Congolese, Ukrainian, and Burmese.
- This quarter we plan to travel to 28 countries and interview approximately 12,000 applicants. Circuit ride schedules for the fourth quarter are currently under discussion.
- As always, we continue to look for efficiencies in our processing. For example, we have continued to send Fraud Detection and National Security officers to certain circuit ride locations to identify and review national security issues in real time. This initiative not only enhances integrity but is also an efficiency measure as in many cases we are able to resolve national security issues during a circuit ride rather than placing the case on hold for headquarters review later.
- Like you, USCIS remains committed to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. The USRAP is truly a public/private partnership and we look forward to your continued support. Thank you for all you do to support refugees as they start a new life in the United States.
- I welcome your questions.