

POLICY BRIEF

YEAR ONE OF SAFE MOBILITY OFFICES (SMO) IN COLOMBIA

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Migration in the Americas Project is a policy and research collective of the **University of Wisconsin-Madison** focused on assessing migration policy and developing ways to reduce risk and harm to make movement and residence safer for migrants throughout the Western Hemisphere.



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BACKGROUND

On June 10, 2022, leaders from more than twenty countries in the Western Hemisphere released a joint statement named the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection. The declaration expressed the countries' commitment to "collaborate closely to facilitate safe, organized, compassionate, and regular migration" in the area (White House, 2022). While this is not the first instance of states cooperating to regulate human migration flows (McKinnon & Barbato, 2024), it marked one of the first occasions where numerous Western Hemisphere countries publicly and collaboratively agreed to manage human migration in the region. Five objectives for coordinated action were detailed in the statement:

1. Promoting Stability and Assistance for Communities of Destination, Origin, Transit, and Return
2. Promoting Regular Pathways for Migration and International Protection
3. Promoting Humane Migration Management
4. Promoting a Coordinated Emergency Response
5. A Shared Approach to Reduce and Manage Irregular Migration

There has been significant progress in item 2, which focuses on Promoting Regular Pathways for Migration and International Protection. This progress is evident through the establishment of Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs) in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Guatemala.

These offices process applications for regular pathways to US immigration programs. Initially introduced as regional processing centers in April 2023, when the United States revealed its plans to open these offices outside of the country. By May 2023, US officials had partnered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization on Migration (IOM) in in these four countries to establish these processing centers, now known as Safe Mobility Offices or "Oficinas de Movilidad Segura" (OMS) in Spanish.

The aim of this report is to outline the functions, operations, and outcomes of these offices one year post-establishment. Specifically, the report will center on the SMO in Colombia and draw connections to the operations of SMO offices in other countries as applicable.

HOW DOES THE SMO APPLICATION PROCESS WORK?

Individuals and families interested in pursuing one of the standard migration routes through the SMO should start by completing an online application on www.movilidadsegura.org. Upon visiting the website, applicants must select their current location from the four available countries: Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Guatemala. Each SMO country location has specific eligibility criteria, so it's crucial to verify eligibility based on the applicant's location.

In Colombia, the eligibility requirements for application include the following:

- Applicants must hold Cuban, Haitian, or Venezuelan nationality.
- They must have resided in Colombia since June 1, 2023, regardless of their mode of entry.
- They should be in regular status or in the process of obtaining regular status in Colombia at the time of application on the website.

While the website is accessible at all times, the application is only open on specific days and times until a set quota is reached. For instance, in Colombia, applications are currently accepted on Tuesdays and Thursdays, starting at 8:00 AM until the daily application limit is reached.

Frequent reasons that USCIS Denies a Case for Refugee Resettlement

- Inadmissible under the Immigrant Nationality Act
- The applicant's credibility is in doubt
- Evidence of involvement in a criminal organization
- Evidence that the person has a well-established life in a country outside of their country of origin
- Evidence that they have made return trips to their country of origin where they claim to fear persecution

WHAT PROGRAMS ARE PROCESSED THROUGH SMO?

Currently, there are four programs operating through the SMO offices in Colombia: Refugee Resettlement, Humanitarian Parole, Family Reunification, and Temporary Work Permits. In the initial year, the Refugee Resettlement and Humanitarian Parole processes have been the main focus, with Refugee Resettlement taking precedence for eligible individuals. By April 25, 2025, the SMO office in Colombia had received 42,874 individual applications, involving a total of 109,303 individuals (Personal Communication, 2024). On average, the SMO offices handle around 8,000 cases monthly, indicating that individuals awaiting evaluation might experience wait times spanning months or even years.

Applications for the refugee resettlement program undergo an initial screening by the UNHCR to determine if the applicant meets the qualifying protection needs and fits the definition of a refugee as per the 1951 United Nations Refugee Definition applicable in the United States. The UNHCR further conducts both telephonic and in-person interviews with applicants during the screening process. Approved cases by the UNHCR are then forwarded to the US Citizenship and Immigrant Services (USCIS) office for additional processing and assessment. The USCIS office in Colombia receives approximately 3,000 new cases monthly from the UNHCR for the refugee resettlement program. Notably, 95% of the cases forwarded by the UNHCR are accepted for the refugee resettlement program. The USCIS office in Colombia revealed that 98% of the cases it receives are from Venezuelan nationals, while 2% are from Cuban nationals. The gender distribution among applicants is evenly split, with 50% men and 50% women, and there is a notable number of family-based applications processed by the office.

Cases that do not meet the criteria of the refugee resettlement program are referred to the IOM for assessment under alternative pathways. In urgent situations, such as severe medical conditions, the humanitarian parole program is frequently considered as the next best option for individuals and families. Since April 2024, the USCIS in Colombia had processed 23 SMO applications for humanitarian parole.

TYPICAL REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT PROCESSING PROGRAMS TAKE YEARS



USCIS IN COLOMBIA PROCESSES REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT APPLICATIONS IN ONLY 9 DAYS!

Candidates are welcomed to Bogotá, Colombia and accommodated in a hotel throughout the interview process, background and security checks, medical exams, and cultural orientation, a process that typically takes around nine days. If approved for the program, applicants return back to their homes in Colombia to await their match with a sponsor organization and final clearance for travel.

Benefits of Refugee Resettlement Program:

- It provides a route to permanent residency and eventually, citizenship.
- Holding a valid passport is not a requirement.
- Upon resettlement in the US, individuals will be linked with a resettlement agency that helps newcomers secure housing, employment, and language courses. The agency also aids in enrolling in essential services and programs. Agency assistance and orientation can last up to the first five years after being resettled.
- Resettled refugees are eligible for public social services such as healthcare and emergency food aid as long as they meet the minimum income criteria.

PEOPLE HAVE BEEN RESETTLED IN THE UNITED STATES THROUGH THE SMO PROGRAM!

In January 2024, the SMO Refugee Resettlement Program in the US had already received 3,000 newcomers (Associated Press, 2024). By May 2024, the White House mentioned that 21,000 individuals had been authorized for resettlement from the four SMO offices (White House, 2024).

The White House also used the 2nd anniversary of the Los Angeles Declaration to announce that the SMO offices in Guatemala and Costa Rica would be expanding application opportunities to new countries of origin. The announcement also added new details about new and/or expanded programs for temporary work permits, including what was framed as a new regional labor mobility initiative called the “Alianza de Movilidad Laboral para las Américas” or “Labor Neighbors” that USAID will develop and run (White House, 2024)

The **Migration in the Americas Project** is focused on analyzing migration policy and developing ways to reduce risk to make movement and residence safer for migrants throughout the Western Hemisphere. We will continue to assess the implementation of these and other options for regular migration and share information as it becomes available.

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