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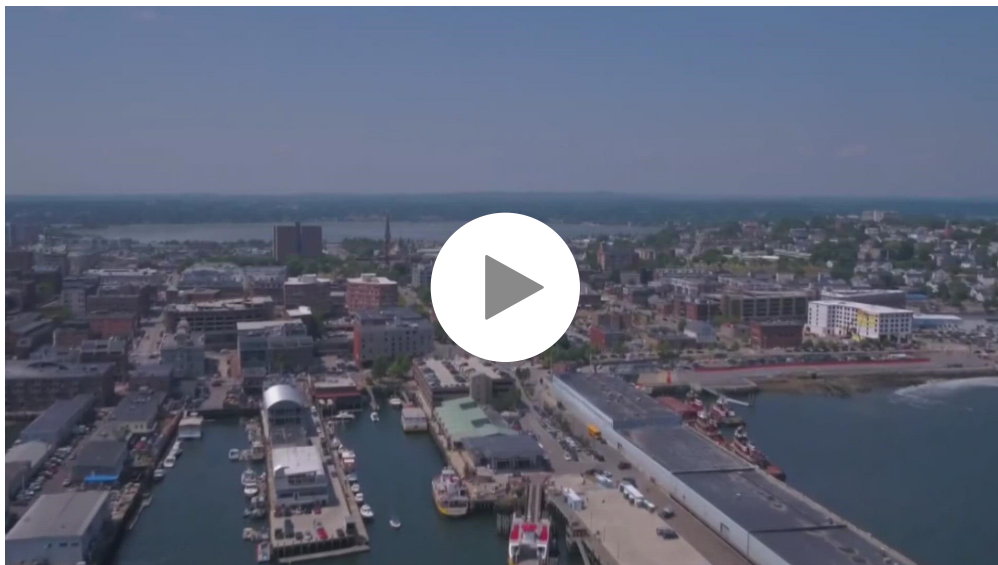
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MAINE IMMIGRATION

City of Portland, social services organizations overwhelmed by surging number of asylum seekers

According to city staff, Portland is housing 727 asylum seekers at its shelters and 10 area hotels.



Author: Sean Stackhouse (NEWS CENTER Maine)
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PORTLAND, Maine — As the number of asylum seekers in Portland increases, officials say the city has become overwhelmed.

"We see the numbers just increase week by week," Mufalo Chitam, executive director of the [Maine Immigrant Rights Coalition](#), said.

Every day, she and her team work with the record number of asylum seekers a to offer support.



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"Our staff is stretched so thin. We can only clone ourselves so many times," Chitam said.

According to Portland Health and Human Services Director Kristen Dow, the city currently provides housing for 727 asylum seekers. That's more than 200 more asylum seekers than in 2019 when the Portland Expo was used as an emergency shelter.

Sean Stackhouse
@StackhouseNCME · Follow

[#StretchedThin](#) The City of Portland and social services agencies say they're overwhelmed by the growing number of Asylum Seekers arriving in the city. Right now, @CityPortland is housing 727 Asylum Seekers. That's about 200+ more than when the Portland Expo was used in 2019

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"Our shelters are full, and they have been for quite some time. So because they are full, we've had to utilize hotels," Dow said.

With the city's emergency shelters at capacity, Portland has been housing asylum seekers and others experiencing homeless at 10 different hotels across five different municipalities. In total, the city is providing housing to 1,198 individuals.

"This calls for everybody to step up to the plate to be able to provide support to the new arrivals," Charles Mugabe, the director of case management for [Catholic Charities Maine](#), said.

CCM is another organization working closely with asylum seekers to provide services.


In addition to working with asylum seekers and other new Mainers, CCM is also a licensed resettlement agency working to support refugees arriving in Maine. According to Mugabe,

CCM helped resettle 104 Afghan refugees.

There is a difference in how refugees and asylum seekers are supported. According to [Citizen and Immigrant Services](#), [refugee status](#) is a form of protection that may be granted to people who meet the definition of refugee and who are of special humanitarian concern to the United States.

Refugees are generally people outside of their country who are unable or unwilling to return home because they fear serious harm. Many refugees are supported upon arrival in the country through resettlement agencies like CCM.

[Asylum status](#) is a form of protection available to people who meet the definition of refugee but are already in the United States seeking protection because they have suffered persecution or fear that they will suffer persecution due to race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Chitam and Dow said there is no concentrated effort to support asylum seekers like there is for refugees.



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Asylum seekers can also not apply for permission to work in the United States at the same time they apply for asylum. In many cases, asylum seekers cannot apply for employment authorization until one year after the completion of an asylum application.

With fewer coordinated services provided for asylum seekers, the city of Portland and social services organizations have worked around the clock to care for them.

"Frankly, this is going to take a much larger approach than what one municipality can tackle," Dow said.

Dow added that Portland staff are in communication with the state government, looking to find ways to best support new Mainers.

"We're trying to ask the state to reengage in this crisis," Chitam said.

Another concern at Portland City Hall is funding for hotels for those experiencing homeless and new Mainers. Currently, the state reimburses Portland 70% of hotel costs used to support those that are unhoused through general assistance, according to Dow.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency reimburses the other 30% of the costs. Dow said that funding from FEMA could expire in April.

"It is something that Portland has been shouldering, and I'm hopeful that we can have conversations to really have this be a more regional approach and more statewide approach," Dow said.

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