

# PURPOSE OF THIS MANUAL

Relocation to the United States as a refugee represents both a profound opportunity and a serious responsibility. It offers protection, legal status, and the possibility of long-term stability. At the same time, it requires compliance with U.S. law, adaptation to new cultural norms, and active participation in American civic and economic life.

This manual is designed as a pre-departure orientation chapter to prepare South African refugees for successful integration into the United States. Preparation before departure significantly improves long-term outcomes. Refugees who understand legal requirements, employment expectations, financial systems, and cultural norms are more likely to achieve economic stability, lawful permanent residency, and eventual citizenship.

## **This chapter prepares you for:**

- Life in the United States
- Your legal rights and responsibilities
- Cultural expectations
- Employment standards
- Financial systems
- Community integration
- Long-term immigration pathways

## **1. Life in the United States**

The United States is a federal republic composed of 50 states, each with its own laws, policies, and local customs. While federal law governs immigration and national policy, many daily aspects of life—such as education systems, transportation infrastructure, healthcare access, and housing regulations—vary by state and municipality.

The U.S. is also one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse countries in the world. Immigrants and refugees from every continent contribute to American society. According to the U.S. Department of State, refugee resettlement is designed not only to provide safety but to promote self-sufficiency and long-term integration into local communities.<sup>1</sup>

## **Daily life in the United States operates through structured systems:**

- Life in the United States
- Your legal rights and responsibilities
- Cultural expectations
- Employment standards
- Financial systems
- Community integration
- Long-term immigration pathways

Unlike informal or cash-based systems common in many parts of the world, U.S. systems rely heavily on documentation, identification, and digital records. Preparation before departure helps reduce confusion upon arrival.



## 2. Your Legal Rights and Responsibilities

### Legal Status

Refugees admitted to the United States are granted lawful status under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA).<sup>2</sup> Upon admission, refugees are authorized to live and work in the U.S. immediately.

Refugees are protected from return to a country where they face persecution, consistent with U.S. law and international refugee protections.<sup>3</sup>

#### Your Rights Include:

- Authorization to work in the United States
- Access to certain public benefits during initial resettlement
- Eligibility to apply for a Social Security number
- Enrollment of children in public schools
- Freedom of religion, speech, and lawful assembly

#### Your Responsibilities Include:

- Obeying all federal, state, and local laws
- Filing annual income tax returns if earning income
- Reporting change of address to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)
- Registering for Selective Service (males ages 18–26)<sup>4</sup>
- Applying for lawful permanent residence (Green Card) within one year of arrival<sup>5</sup>

Failure to comply with these requirements can negatively affect immigration status and future eligibility for citizenship.

Understanding these legal responsibilities before departure ensures that refugees avoid preventable mistakes that could jeopardize long-term residency.

## 3. Cultural Expectations

Cultural adaptation is often one of the most challenging aspects of resettlement.

### Individual Responsibility

American society places strong emphasis on individual responsibility. Adults are expected to manage appointments, finances, and employment independently. While support networks exist, government agencies and employers generally expect individuals to take initiative.

### Communication Style

Communication in the United States is typically direct and task-oriented. In professional settings, clarity and efficiency are prioritized. Direct feedback is common and is usually not intended as disrespect.



## Punctuality and Professional Norms

Time management is highly valued. Being late to work, school, or appointments may be viewed as unprofessional. Consistent punctuality builds trust and credibility.

## Personal Space and Boundaries

Americans tend to value personal space and privacy. It is common to maintain physical distance during conversation and to avoid personal questions in early relationships.

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) includes cultural orientation training specifically to address these norms prior to arrival.<sup>6</sup> Understanding these expectations reduces cultural misunderstandings and accelerates integration.

## 4. Employment Standards

Employment is central to successful resettlement. The U.S. resettlement model emphasizes **early employment and economic self-sufficiency** as key integration outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

### Work Authorization

Refugees are authorized to work immediately upon arrival in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Employment Authorization Documents (EADs) are processed as part of refugee admission procedures.

### Workplace Expectations

American workplaces typically require:

- Punctual attendance
- Adherence to safety standards
- Compliance with anti-discrimination policies
- Professional communication
- Productivity and accountability

U.S. labor law protects workers from discrimination based on race, religion, national origin, gender, and other protected characteristics.<sup>7</sup> Employees also have rights related to minimum wage, workplace safety, and overtime pay.

### Starting Employment

Many refugees initially work in entry-level positions regardless of prior professional status. This is often necessary to gain U.S. work experience, improve English proficiency, and establish employment history.

Preparation for this reality prevents discouragement and helps individuals plan strategically for career advancement over time.

## 5. Financial Systems

The American financial system is highly formalized and credit-based.



## Banking

Opening a checking and savings account is essential for:

- Receiving wages
- Paying rent and utilities
- Building financial records

Most employers deposit wages electronically.

## Credit System

A credit score is a numerical rating that reflects borrowing and repayment history. Credit scores influence:

- Rental approvals
- Car loans
- Mortgages
- Insurance rates
- Some employment decisions

Building credit responsibly—through timely bill payments and cautious use of credit products—is critical to long-term financial mobility.

## Taxes

All individuals who earn income in the United States must file annual federal income tax returns. Failure to file taxes can create legal and immigration complications.

Financial literacy is frequently included in refugee orientation programming because misunderstanding credit, debt, or taxes can create long-term hardship.<sup>6</sup>

## 6. Community Integration

Successful resettlement involves more than employment and housing—it requires belonging.

### Education and Language

Public education is free for children. Adult English language programs are widely available through community colleges and nonprofit organizations. English proficiency strongly correlates with employment advancement and income growth.

### Civic Participation

Lawful permanent residents may not vote in federal elections, but they may participate in community meetings, volunteer organizations, and local associations.

### Social Networks

Faith communities, cultural organizations, and local nonprofits provide social support and opportunities for connection. Maintaining cultural identity while adapting to American civic norms is both possible and encouraged.

Research consistently shows that strong social networks improve long-term integration outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

## 7. Long-Term Immigration Pathway

Refugee status is the beginning of a structured immigration process.



## Adjustment to Permanent Residency

Refugees are required to apply for lawful permanent residence (Green Card) one year after arrival.<sup>5</sup>

## Naturalization

After holding permanent resident status for the required statutory period (generally five years), individuals may apply for U.S. citizenship.<sup>9</sup> Citizenship grants:

- The right to vote
- Eligibility for certain federal employment
- Protection from removal (except in rare cases involving fraud)
- A U.S. passport

Understanding this pathway before departure allows families to plan for documentation, fees, and compliance requirements.

## Conclusion

Relocation to the United States is a life-changing transition. It provides safety and opportunity—but it also demands preparation, responsibility, and active participation.

This manual exists to ensure that South African refugees arrive informed rather than uncertain; prepared rather than overwhelmed. Knowledge of legal requirements, employment expectations, financial systems, and cultural norms increases the likelihood of successful integration and long-term stability.

Preparation before departure is not optional—it is foundational.

## Footnotes

1. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), *Reception and Placement (R&P) Program Overview*.
2. Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) § 207, 8 U.S.C. § 1157 (Refugee Admissions).
3. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), *Refugees and Asylum Overview*.
4. Selective Service System, *Who Must Register*.
5. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), *Green Card for Refugees (Adjustment of Status)*.
6. U.S. Department of State, U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), *Cultural Orientation Program*.
7. U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), *Federal Laws Prohibiting Employment Discrimination*.
8. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), *Refugee Resettlement Program Overview*.
9. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), *Naturalization Eligibility Requirements*.

