

DePaul Migration Collaborative

DePaul Alum: Claire Holba (DePaul RFMS '23)

Topic: Welcome Corps

Official Transcript

Hello, my name is Claire Holba, and I currently work as an Immigration Policy Analyst at the Niskanen Center in Washington, DC. I lead their US Refugee Admissions Program and humanitarian policy portfolio of work. Right now, I am primarily focused on building support and developing policy around the Welcome Corps, Welcome Corps on Campus and Welcome Corps at Work programs, including finding avenues to engage states and sponsorship opportunities. In another role, I serve as Director of Policy and Advocacy with Patchwork Indy, a private sponsorship organization in the state of Indiana under the federal Welcome Corps program.

The Welcome Corps is the most significant innovation to the US Refugee Admissions Program, also known as the USRAP in decades, Welcome Corps empowers Americans to privately sponsor refugees seeking freedom and safety, modelled after Canada's long standing and successful sponsorship program, the Welcome Corps draws on the promise of private sector engagement to welcome and integrate refugees into American society. The program is expansive, it enables Americans from any town or city to form local teams and apply to sponsor a refugee of any nationality. Sponsors can either sign up to be matched by the government with the refugee already admitted to the US Refugee Admissions Program and who is waiting to come to the US or sponsors can name and refer a refugee they already know who was

displaced overseas and seeking safety and freedom in a third country. All refugees sponsored through the Welcome Corps undergo the same vetting and security screening processes as other refugees coming to the US. They arrive authorized to work and on a set pathway to legal permanent residence and US citizenship. I first became involved with the Welcome Corps last year in January 2023 during my internship with the Niskanen Centre while completing my graduate program at DePaul. Since 2015, Niskanen has operated a policy portfolio dedicated to private refugee sponsorship, where they've published original research and policy recommendations on the subject. Their work has been critical in building consensus among refugee advocates and stakeholders that private sponsorship could play a promising role in enhancing the US refugee program. Niskanen has long been at the forefront of this issue, and so it was incredible for me to start working with their team right as the Biden administration launched the Welcome Corps program in January 2023. I was quickly afforded the opportunity to work on this portfolio in a dynamic moment while Welcome Corps was being implemented real time.

I was working with advocates and stakeholders at the national level, while simultaneously being rooted in Indianapolis and seeing how the program was unfolding on the ground. We were seeing the need for grassroots mobilization of sponsors through community-based organizations and so, I began talking with my peers at Patchwork Indy, a nonprofit organization I helped co-found in 2019 to work with Indiana's many diverse cultural communities, including those who came to the US. refugee resettlement. After multiple meetings and conversations with other Patchwork team members, we decided Patchwork could help fill that need in Indiana and so we applied to be a private sponsorship organization under the Welcome Corps. My role

involved jointly with the Niskanen Center and Patchwork and I've been working with both to create a reciprocal feedback loop between national and local stakeholders, all with the goal of nurturing a successful implementation of the Welcome Corps.

The Welcome Corps is intended to expand the capacity of the US refugee program. It is not meant to replace the traditional resettlement program and resettlement agencies and their affiliates across the country who still play a vital role. There are over 31.6 million refugees in the world officially under the UNHCR mandate, not including countless others who have been forcibly displaced. Less than 1% of refugees get the opportunity to be resettled in a third country. So, there's a dire need for expanded and complementary pathways to third country resettlement programs, Welcome Corps and other similar models of private refugee sponsorship that other countries have, offer complementary pathways to third country resettlement. Now the key difference between traditional resettlement in the US through an agency versus Welcome Corps is that sponsors are expected to directly support refugees in their first 90 days in their new community. This involves the sponsor group helping enroll children in school, helping the family find housing, connecting the refugees they're sponsoring to local social services, helping with English language practice, finding jobs and more.

Welcome Corps is also deepening and expanding protection pathways. So, through the Welcome Corps, a group of sponsors can refer a refugee they already know to the US Refugee Admissions Program. This is the first time Americans can play such a direct and lifesaving role in this way for a refugee to have a chance at being admitted to the US Refugee Admissions Program, refugees who might otherwise never access a third country program because of current referral mechanisms, therefore, sitting in limbo for years or even decades, can now be referred by Americans to the US Refugee

Admissions Program. This is a referral by Americans who are saying, we want you here, and we want to walk with you on your journey in America.

I was ecstatic to learn that DePaul is participating in the Welcome Corps on Campus program. Welcome Corps on Campus is an iteration of Welcome Corps where universities can bring a refugee student to safety and a permanent pathway to citizenship, citizenship in the US while first studying and getting a US degree. As a DePaul alumni, I am so proud DePaul is stepping forward to welcome refugee students through the Welcome Corps on Campus program. I can give you all the statistics and reasons why universities are integral to expanding safe pathways for refugees, but this is also really personal to me. In 2018, I taught 200 high school students in a refugee camp in Thailand. My students were predominantly from the Karen ethnic group and had fled long-standing violence and persecution. The camps have been around for 40 years, and most of my students have been born in the camps. One of the few ways and hopes that they had for getting out of the camp was to continue their higher education.

Universities are some of the most well-equipped institutions to welcome refugee students and support them as they adjust to their new life in America. They really are experts in providing safe spaces to students, community networks and providing mentorship on life after university. I think one of the biggest, biggest next steps is really continuing to get the word out of the program. The beauty of the Welcome Corps is that there are no limits to who can engage and come forward as sponsors. There is so much expansive, creative, and innovative potential within the program. I have met with pastors, imams, rabbis, business leaders, chambers of commerce, university professionals, veterans, NGO executives, young professionals, attorneys, even professional sports organizations, to talk about the Welcome Corps and how they can

become involved. I'm looking to keep getting the word out to as many diverse audiences as possible and I'm always meeting new people who haven't heard about the program, and once I tell them about it, they are extremely interested. I think another critical next step for the Welcome Corps is continuing to help our community leaders, especially our government representatives, understand the value of this program to their constituents, and that this is something their constituents want. So how does someone become involved in the Welcome Corps, one thing I would love to suggest is connect with the local PSO. If you are interested in becoming involved in the Welcome Corps, that's a private sponsorship organization who is trained and accredited through the Welcome Corps to provide mentorship, support and guidance for sponsors.

You can tap into an informational session. They have those prerecorded on demand or you can attend them every Wednesday. I am also always happy to connect and share more about the Welcome Corps program.