Refugee All-Stars

October 1, 2000 By Denny Lee

Mohammed Ali was tortured and imprisoned in his native Ethiopia for his political views. After his release, Ali and his family of nine managed to flee to Kenya, where they were accepted at the U.S. embassy as refugees. But Ali's dreams of raising his children on American soil were dashed two years ago when his HIV status was discovered. Under current U.S. policy, all refugees are subjected to a medical evaluation, including an HIV test, before being resettled. To add insult to injury, positive refugees unable to prove they can cover medical costs are barred from entering the country.

A quiet but meaningful change in federal policy, however, is rekindling Ali's hopes and those of nearly 300 refugees worldwide left stranded by the ban. In June 1999, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) repealed the financial handicap. As INS spokesperson Bill Strassberger explained, "The change recognizes that once you are given refugee status, you are eligible for resettlement benefits from the government."

Practically speaking, "it means that these people won't die in refugee camps," said Gail Pendleton, a leading expert in HIV and immigration who works with the National Lawyers' Guild. "From a policy standpoint, it ensures that the United States is complying with international standards."

The refugee ban grew out of the INS' blanket exclusion of all HIV positive immigrants, which remains in effect. To accommodate the U.S. refugee program, under which 90,000 will be resettled this year, waivers were established to allow some HIV positive applicants to be admitted. (Applicants must still prove "minimal risk" of spreading the virus and endangering public health, requirements that are typically met by demonstrating knowledge of how AIDS can be prevented.)

About 100 refugees are expected to arrive later this year in Boston, New York, Chicago, San Diego, San Francisco and Minneapolis. "Our role will be to educate newly arrived refugees on how to manage their HIV disease," said Betty Hayes, director of the Minneapolis Lutheran Social Services, one of the refugee programs that will help bridge the language and access gaps. "These are people suspended in time."

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Refugee-All-Stars-1396-4142