

# Will Buffalo see a Ukrainian refugee influx? Not for a while

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From left, volunteers Alexandra Savka, Stefania Lemeshivska, middle, with her broken arm in a sling that she injured in a train station while caught up in a mass exodus from Ukraine, and new friend Olga Bula, prepare dinners for sale during a fundraising session at the Dnipro Ukrainian Cultural Center on Genesee Street in Buffalo on Friday, March 18, 2022. - Robert Kirkham

The images from 4,500 miles away shock the conscience, yet they're depressingly familiar. Women and children from Ukraine crowd into makeshift shelters in Poland and elsewhere in Europe, safe from war but anguished over the homes they've lost, at least for now.

They're the sort of people Buffalo has welcomed for generations, so it's only natural to ask the question: Will some of these Ukrainian refugees find new homes in Western New York?

The answer is: probably – yet it's far too soon to know when, or how many. And it may not be a huge number, simply because Ukrainian refugees have options closer to home.

In less than a month, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has pushed more than 3 million people westward in the world's biggest refugee exodus in this century. And while the vast majority of those people want to go home or

settle in Europe, an undetermined number will likely end up settling in the U.S., government officials and refugee resettlement experts said.

"Given the numbers that we're looking at, there is almost certainly going to be an interest, a demand on countries far from Europe – including the United States – to take people in," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in response to a question from The Buffalo News last week.

Saying the U.S. is particularly interested in helping families reunite, Blinken added: "I expect that we'll have more to say about that in the coming days as we really plunge into this, but we're determined to do our part in showing that we're a place of refuge and welcome as well – and particularly because there are such strong Ukrainian-American communities here. I know that people would be very welcoming."

One of those places, of course, is metro Buffalo. According to Emil Bandriwsky, president of the Dnipro Ukrainian Cultural Center on Genesee Street, about 20,000 people of Ukrainian descent live in the Buffalo area. Home to several Ukrainian churches as well as two such cultural centers, Buffalo will be a welcoming place for Ukrainian refugees who choose to come to America, he said.



*Emil Bandriwsky, right, president of the Dnipro Ukrainian Cultural Center, speaks with Ba Zan Lin, a Burmese community organizer, during a fundraiser at the DUCC on Genesee Street in Buffalo on Friday, March 18, 2022. - Robert Kirkham*

The Dnipro cultural center had a meeting last week on the refugee issue and 40 people showed up, all of them with relatives who may want to resettle in the U.S., he said.

"In Buffalo, our team has already identified several hundred refugees, potentially," Bandriwsky said.

What's more, Gov. Kathy Hochul, Erie County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz and Mayor Byron W. Brown all have visited the cultural center to stress that Buffalo welcomes refugees, he said.

"And as we know, the City of Buffalo for the first time in 70 years just had a population increase, and it's primarily because of refugees," Bandriwsky said.

But those refugees – primarily from Burma and several troubled African nations – stand as living proof that it may be a while before large numbers of Ukrainians settle in Buffalo.

They came to America legally under a 42-year-old federal program in which a United Nations agency first deems refugees eligible for resettlement before the U.S. vets them for any health or security concerns. For virtually every refugee, that process takes years.

At this point, Ukrainian refugees don't look like a good fit for that program, especially given the fact that the European Union has granted them the right to live and work in the EU for the next three years, no questions asked.

"All those fleeing Putin's bombs are welcome in Europe," the EU president, Ursula von der Leyen, said in a statement. "We will provide protection to those seeking shelter and we will help those looking for a safe way home."

Blinken said most Ukrainian refugees will want to stay in Europe, given that the vast majority are women and children whose husbands and fathers are fighting the invading Russians.

"They want to stay if they can as close as possible in the hopes that they can be quickly reunited and in the hopes that the war will end quickly and they can go home," he said. "Second, many Ukrainians have family relatives in Europe, and once you're in Europe, you have a fair bit of freedom of movement."

The exception to that, of course, might be Ukrainian refugees who want to reunite with family in America. Some of them may already be in the United States: in fact, the Biden administration recently gave 18-month temporary protected status to 75,000 Ukrainians who were already in the country when the war started.

There's also a longstanding federal resettlement program for persecuted religious minorities to resettle with family in the U.S., and some Ukrainians may be able to come to America under that effort, said Molly Short Carr, CEO of Jewish Family Services of Buffalo and Erie County, one of the region's four refugee resettlement agencies.



"But if they don't have any connection to the United States, they weren't already in the process, and they can stay in Europe safely and work and take care of themselves and potentially go back home, that is the better option for them," she said.

Karen Andolina Scott, executive director of Journey's End Refugee Services in Buffalo, agreed.

"Permanent resettlement is almost always the last choice," she said. "Certainly repatriation, or people being able to go home, is what everybody wants. And so I think it's a little early to tell if permanent resettlement is the way to go here. Now it won't be surprising if it is, of course. But I don't think we're quite there yet."

Carr stressed that the Ukrainian refugees are in a far different spot than the Afghans who came to America last summer as U.S. troops withdrew from Afghanistan. Those were people who worked closely with U.S. forces and were in danger as the Taliban took over the country. And the Afghans had nowhere else to go, whereas the Ukrainians have more options.



*A refugee from the Ukrainian city of Mykolaiv, Ekaterina Mosha, 82, has a meal with her grandson Dmitrii, 3, after fleeing the war from neighboring Ukraine, at the border crossing in Palanca, Moldova, Saturday, March 19, 2022.*

*Sergei Grits/Associated Press*

"There are a lot of safe places, thankfully, for this

group of refugees," said Melanie Nezer, senior vice president of global public affairs, at HIAS, a Jewish international refugee resettlement agency that recently held a briefing call on the Ukrainian refugee crisis. "I wish that were true for everybody. The U.S. will be an appropriate option for some of them, but not for all of them."