

R.I. immigrant advocates predict rise in post-Title 42 arrivals. But how many?

‘We are not prepared’

BY: KEVIN G. ANDRADE MAY 22, 2023 5:16 PM



Staffers enter the Refugee Dream Center in Providence after a break. Though focused on refugees, many of the center's approximately 2,600 clients throughout Rhode Island are undocumented. (Photo by Kevin G. Andrade/Rhode Island Current)

The weathered face of the tall, thin man sitting at the head of a long plastic conference table inside a former Baptist Church on Providence's South Side makes him look older than 42.

His name is Sidi and he has been working long days at a convenience store and sending money back to his wife and child in Dakar, Senegal. He last saw them in person on Sept. 14, 2021, the day he began his journey to the U.S.

His plans actually started weeks earlier in Morocco where he had obtained a tourist visa to visit Brazil. He spent a year in São Paulo selling pants as a peddler and saving money. By October 2022, he and a friend took a plane to Managua, Nicaragua, before heading to its border with Honduras and paying smugglers — known as coyotes — to take them north.

By the time he climbed the fence into California — near the Mexican city of Mexicali, capital of Baja California — and surrendered himself to United States Border Patrol agents in November, his friend had long since died. He chose a cheaper coyote that took him into the countryside, beat him, robbed him, and left him for dead.

“I already knew all the consequences, but I wanted a better life,” said Sidi, speaking through an interpreter in Wolof, a language native to the West African countries of Senegal, Gambia, and Mauritania, during an interview with Rhode Island Current at the Refugee Dream Center in Providence.

“I came to America to have a better life because I know in the U.S., there's more opportunities, more democracy, more stability than in Senegal.”

But Sidi came to America without papers. Local immigrant advocates said they are worried more like him may be coming after the end of a Trump era immigration policy that allowed the immediate deportation of border crossers under COVID-19 emergency rules. The policy that ended on May 11, known as Title 42, denied migrants the right to seek asylum.

Staff at the Refugee Dream Center where Sidi is a client have helped him get a job and make friends. Yet center co-founder Teddi Jallow, said its small staff of 13 who provide services to 2,600 clients across Rhode Island may not be able to handle the many she believes will be coming.

Sidi is not officially a refugee, a status only obtained after residing in a refugee camp and being registered by the United Nations. But Refugee Dream Center co-founder Teddi Jallow said the center helps immigrants like Sidi who are undocumented.

“We haven't seen as many undocumented come asking for help as we have since January,” Jallow said. “Recently, we've helped five [undocumented] families and two undocumented [individuals] who came here from the border.

“They will come to Rhode Island, and we are not prepared.”

Not here yet, but they're coming

Deborah González, director of the Immigration Law Clinic at Roger Williams University, said resources are not that strained among immigrant groups in Rhode Island yet. But, given its positioning between the two economic hubs of Boston and New York City, it's only a matter of time.

“We're not seeing many come here,” González said. “But I imagine it's only a matter of time.”



They will come to Rhode Island, and we are not prepared.

— Teddi Jallow, co-founder of Refugee Dream Center in Providence

According to [the Latino Policy Institute](#), there are an estimated 27,000 undocumented immigrants currently living in Rhode Island.

[Data from the Transactional Records Access Clearing House Immigration](#) showed 26,163 new immigration cases filed in the Boston Immigration Court — whose jurisdiction includes Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Maine, and New Hampshire — between Sept. 1, 2022, through April 30, 2023. There were a total 35,746 filed in the 2022 fiscal year.

Those cases are not restricted to those crossing the southern border and include visa overstays, revocation of residency, asylum, visa overstays, and other deportation cases.

Jallow said the Refugee Dream Center is already feeling the pressure. Its 13 staffers — including Jallow and her husband, co-founder and co-director Omar Bah — include two full time case workers — who personally listen to and address the needs of clients, often providing transport to appointments, shopping, and other essentials.

She said all staffers and some volunteers have to serve as case workers to some capacity. She estimated another seven full-time workers would be necessary to handle the uptick she expects.

In order to get that, the organization would need an increase in grant money and private donations.

“When Afghan refugees came, I don't think agencies were prepared to bring 300 plus to Rhode Island,” Jallow said. “It was so overwhelming. There's no way 13 can do it.”

Catarina Lorenzo, the executive director of the Alliance to Mobilize Our Resistance (AMOR), a coalition of immigrant advocate groups based in Providence, voiced similar concerns.

“In places like New York and Boston, there are more groups to help them adjust to life here,” Lorenzo said in Spanish. “Some will come here by word of mouth, but mostly friends and family will invite them.

“There are only about six organizations in Rhode Island.”

She said that though she expects some increase in arrivals locally, it will be small.

“Maybe AMOR can increase its capacity a little bit,” she said, adding that all the group's operational funding comes from private sources. “But we just don't have the means.”

Housing is a top concern

González pointed out that the state's current housing crisis will make things difficult for any increase in capacity.

“They're still [trying to figure out what to do with the homeless population](#),” she said. “What are they going to do with a bushel of immigrants?”

[Rhode Island Housing Secretary Stefan Pryor said at a recent hearing before the House Special Committee to Study the Low Income Housing Crisis](#) that low-income households, defined as those 30% or less of the Area Median Income ([\\$99,300 for a family of four](#)), are 34% of the population but only 24% of the units were affordably priced for them.

[According to a report from Econofact](#), undocumented workers make on average 42% less than the average authorized worker in the U.S., largely due to employers taking advantage of their legal status.

“It's a really sad situation,” González said. “No one in any state wants to see people living in the street.”

She added the only real solution lies with Congress, who has statutory power over immigration policy.

“This was a problem under Obama and Bush too,” González said. “Has anything really changed from 10 years ago?

“What I do think is there's a blame game going on about what this or that president has and hasn't done,” she added. “The real fault goes to Congress who hasn't done a thing in the last 30 years.”

Jallow added that perceptions will make it more difficult to get support when compared to the recent Afghan arrivals, many of whom worked for the military during its occupation of Afghanistan and fled when the Taliban took over that nation in August 2021.

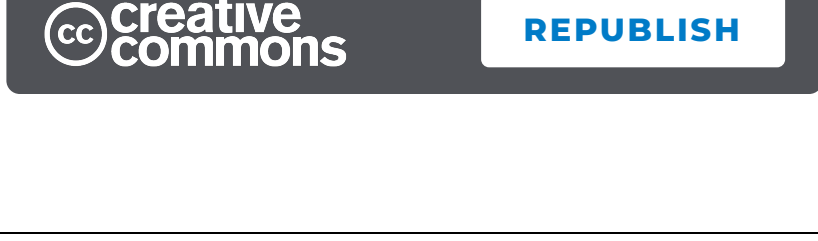
“The sympathy is different,” she said. “Remember that there is a stigma around the border.

“These people are going to face a tougher time than refugees and we are not ready to receive them in Rhode Island.”

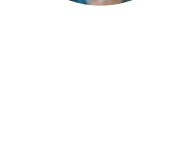
Sidi said he feels grateful for the services the Refugee Dream Center provided him, including connecting him to a lawyer to obtain a legal immigration status and help bring his family over. Yet he knows others may not be so lucky moving forward.



“The main thing I learned is how hard it is to live here without papers,” Sidi said. “I needed to learn how to use the bus, make a doctor's appointment, and get all the things I need. I couldn't do that without the Refugee Dream Center.

“But with what's coming, it's going to be hard to get the same help I did.”



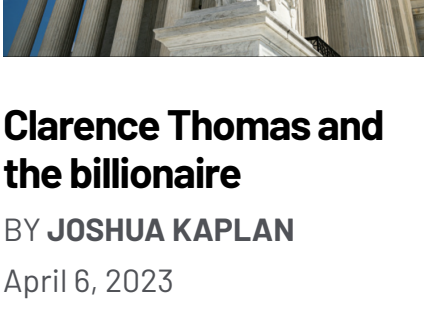
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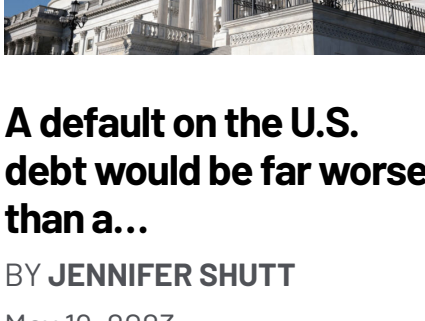
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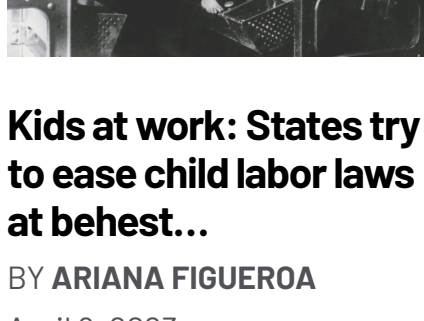
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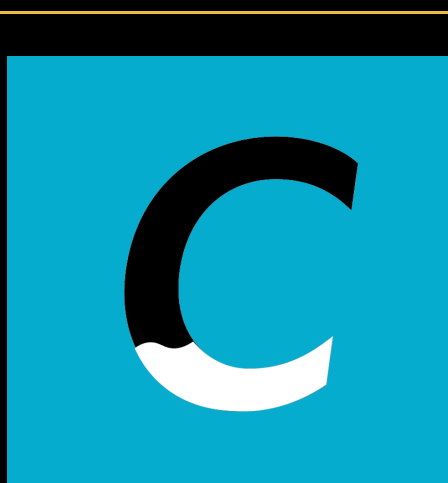
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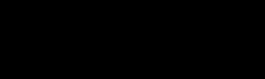
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