



**HIAS**

Welcome the stranger.  
Protect the refugee.

## 2022-2023 Overview HIAS PANAMA

# **HIAS Panama**

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**HIAS Panama 2022**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### ABOUT HIAS

<b>Our History</b> .....	1
<b>Vision, Mission, and Values</b> .....	2
<b>Our Impact</b> .....	3
<b>Accountability to Affected Populations</b> .....	4
<b>Governance, Structure, and Policies</b> .....	5

### HIAS PANAMA

<b>Context for Vulnerable Refugees and Migrants in Panama</b> .....	6
<b>HIAS Programs in Panama</b> .....	7
<b>Coordination: Partners and Peer Networks</b> .....	10
<b>Operational Support for Programs</b> .....	11
<b>Donors and Development</b> .....	13
<b>Communications, Policy, and Advocacy</b> .....	14

## Our History

From our beginnings in the 1880s in a storefront on the Lower East Side of Manhattan providing food and shelter to Jews fleeing antisemitism in Eastern Europe, to our work nearly 140 years later providing social, emotional, legal, and advocacy support to those in need around the world, HIAS has served as a pivotal force for displaced people for generations. Indeed, HIAS began its work even before the world had a legal concept of a “refugee.”

Having helped more than 4.5 million refugees and immigrants escape persecution, HIAS is uniquely qualified to address the modern refugee situation, which has become a global humanitarian crisis. After over 100 years of serving Jews fleeing persecution around the globe, HIAS, starting in the 2000s, expanded its work in the U.S. to include assistance to non-Jewish refugees devastated by the aftermath of conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Ethiopia, Haiti, Hungary, Iran, Morocco, Poland, Romania, Tunisia, Vietnam, and the successor states to the former Soviet Union.

HIAS began a new chapter in 2002 when it established operations in Kenya to provide protection to refugees from African countries plagued by conflict, to advocate on their behalf, and to resettle the most vulnerable. Soon after, we began work in Latin America, serving people displaced by conflict in several countries. Currently HIAS works in 16 countries including Aruba, Austria, Belgium, Chad, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Greece, Guyana, Israel, Kenya, Mexico, Panama, Peru, United States, and Venezuela. As the only global Jewish organization whose mission is to assist refugees wherever they are, HIAS continues to protect, empower, and resettle refugees of all faiths and ethnicities from around the world.



## Vision, Mission, and Values

### Vision

HIAS stands for a world in which refugees find welcome, safety, and opportunity.

### Mission

Drawing on our Jewish values and history, HIAS provides vital services to refugees and asylum seekers around the world and advocates for their fundamental rights so they can rebuild their lives.

### Values

Impassioned by our mission, we bring the lessons of HIAS' history and Jewish ethics and experience to our commitment to serve refugees and other displaced persons of concern around the world through the following values:

#### Welcome • Acogimiento • Hospitalité • הכנסת אורחים (Hachnasat Orchim)

We **Welcome** the Stranger

#### Justice • Justicia • Justice • צדק (Tzedek)

We Pursue **Justice**

#### Empathy • Empatía • Empathie • חסד (Chesed)

We Approach our Clients with **Empathy**

#### Partnership • Compañerismo • Coopération • חברותא (Chevruta)

We Believe in Changing the World through **Partnership**

#### Courage • Coraje • Courage • אומץ (Ometz)

We Act with **Courage** to Build a Better World

#### Resilience • Resiliencia • Résilience • רוח (Ruach)

We Adapt and Thrive, Continuously Demonstrating our **Resilience**





**Photos:** Glenna Gordon; Michael Datikash

## Our Impact

Around the world, HIAS makes tangible changes in the lives of refugees and other forcibly displaced people, advancing their legal, social, and economic rights. Our experience and technical expertise, as well as our integration of international best practices, allows for our work to have real and sustained impact. We partner with government agencies and other humanitarian organizations to reach the greatest number of those in need. The core areas where we work include:

1. Legal Protection
2. Gender-Based Violence Response and Risk Reduction
3. Community-based Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
4. Economic Inclusion

### Legal Protection

Refugees and other people forcibly displaced from home are fleeing persecution and violence. They need to be able to safely cross borders into countries where their lives are not at risk. Once over the border, they need information and legal representation to secure legal status and access their rights. Without that status, refugees are forced to live on the margins of society, sometimes for generations, without access to healthcare, education, dignified work, or safe shelter. HIAS begins by educating refugees about their rights, then secures protection by engaging in advocacy, legal representation, and strategic litigation, and working with government authorities.

### Gender-Based Violence Response and Risk Reduction

Compounded by rampant gender inequality, forced migration and displacement quickly erode the limited protections women, girls, and LGBTQ populations have, even in times of stability. HIAS is driven by their voices and needs, working to empower them and engage the whole community to reduce the risk of gender-based violence. We raise awareness so survivors know where and how to get help after experiencing violence. We train advocates and support existing services so that no survivor—regardless of age, sexual orientation, or gender identity—suffers alone. We help communities begin the kind of transformative work

that leads to longer-term change. We stay connected to and raise our collective voice alongside those of displaced women, girls, and LGBTQ populations globally.

### Community-Based Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

Violence, conflict, and displacement disrupt relationships and daily life, break down existing support systems, and have a devastating impact on mental health, overall wellbeing, and recovery. A supportive environment is essential to healing and recovery for refugees and other people forcibly displaced from their homes. One of the best ways to build a supportive environment is to strengthen existing relationships, networks, and practices which promote mental health and well-being and allow communities to cope and heal. We facilitate community support groups and psychological support from both lay and professional providers and ensure access to services for more intensive mental health support. Crucially, we sustain our efforts by building the psychosocial competence of HIAS personnel and stakeholders to respond to the acute distress of forcibly displaced persons.

### Economic Inclusion

When refugees and forcibly displaced people arrive in countries of asylum, they often need to adapt their skills to earn sustainable and safe livelihoods. HIAS supports refugees on their road to self-reliance, helping them to find programs focused on poverty eradication, employment, entrepreneurship, and financial services. We advocate for the rights of both refugees and local host communities to access dignified, sustainable, and safe work, alongside economic development.

### Emergency Response

In 2021, with the support of a transformational grant from MacKenzie Scott, HIAS embarked on an exciting new initiative to strengthen our global capacity to respond quickly to new humanitarian emergencies. HIAS' Emergency Department will work closely with country offices to create emergency preparedness plans and provide guidance to adapt core programs to emergency contexts. HIAS will also train a cadre of staff with specialized skills able to deploy quickly during emergencies for assessments, response activities, donor engagement, external communication, and advocacy. Through this multiyear initiative, HIAS will build the skills, systems, and organizational culture needed for effective coordination and response to emergencies.

## Accountability to Affected Populations

HIAS' Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) Framework ensures the inclusion of refugees, other forcibly displaced people, and vulnerable host communities throughout the program cycle. Informed by the Core Humanitarian Standards and the principle of "Do No Harm," the framework pillars are: communication and transparency; feedback and response; participation and inclusion; and learning and adaptation.

HIAS ensures that program design is based on evidence from needs assessments, including the annual UNHCR participatory needs assessment, and consultation with affected communities. HIAS shares information about its accountability commitments and available

services in all country offices. HIAS proactively invites affected people to provide feedback on planned and ongoing activities through context-appropriate, accessible channels, ensuring that all affected people can voice feedback, recommendations, and concerns safely and equitably. HIAS uses feedback received to adapt ongoing programs and shape the design and implementation of future programming.

## Governance, Structure, and Policies

Globally, HIAS employs more than 1,300 staff in 16 countries, with headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland (U.S.).

HIAS' Board of Directors is made up of 22 members, including 10 women. It meets at least four times a year. The Board has three officers and operates with six active committees that meet regularly. Board members bring a wide range of professional and business experience to their service, including law, finance, education, and non-profit and refugee advocacy leadership.

HIAS staff are subject to a robust Code of Conduct and set of internal policies, including PSEA, Non-Discrimination and Anti-Harassment, Conflict of Interest, Privacy, Whistleblowing, Security and Emergency Preparedness, Information Security, Data Breach, Finance and Accounting, as well as others relating to procurement, travel, and reimbursements.



Migrants and refugees travel by boat from Canaan Membrillo, the main community that receives refugees after their journey through the Darién jungle, to a migration center in San Vicente. HIAS is present in order to monitor and provide information to refugees on available services. **Photo:** HIAS Panama



## Context for Vulnerable Refugees and Migrants in Panama



The Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) Region continues to face intersecting forced displacement crises, including in Venezuela, Colombia, Northern Central America, and Nicaragua. The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened the economic and social hardships faced by both displaced populations and those hosting them. The more than 18 million people displaced in the region have fled violence, insecurity, persecution, and human rights violations. This number accounts for 20% of all global displacement. HIAS' comprehensive regional response meets the urgent needs of refugees, asylum seekers, and other forcibly

displaced people in Aruba, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guyana, Mexico, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela.

Panama is a country of transit and destination for displaced people from across the region. Panama currently hosts over 121,000 Venezuelans. Panama's legal framework recognizes refugees as defined by the UN Refugee Convention. However, the refugee status determination and asylum processes can be lengthy and costly. There is no required timeframe in which to make an asylum decision, leaving some cases pending for two to five years. Accessing work permits during these periods can be challenging, creating heightened vulnerabilities and needs. Panama offers a residence permit on humanitarian grounds as one complementary mechanism to enable refugees and asylum seekers to have regular status, but more resources are needed to achieve durable solutions. In recent years, the government of Panama has made commitments to improve these processes as well as improve the overall protection of refugees and asylum seekers through its participation in the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS), part of the UN Global Compact on Refugees.

In addition to Venezuelans, Panama also hosts thousands of displaced Central Americans, and serves as a transit point for refugees and migrants traveling north in search of asylum. The Darién Gap wilderness region between Panama and Colombia is seeing an increase in migrants from Haiti, Venezuela, and Cuba as well as from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East attempting the perilous, days-long journey northward. Refugees and migrants trying to cross the Darién risk their lives in hazardous conditions and face sexual violence and other abuses during the journey. In 2021, nearly 122,000 people, including 26,000 children, crossed the Colombian border through the Darién and continued north.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created significant gaps in the region's ability to meet the basic needs of vulnerable refugees and migrants. Refugees and asylum seekers in Panama City and other urban locations continue to require protection and integration assistance, made more challenging by Panama's slow economic recovery, marked by inflation and rising unemployment and costs of living. HIAS Panama program participants report they are facing challenges with eviction risks and limited access to income, lack of job opportunities, and heightened levels of stress.

The impact of the Venezuela situation and COVID-19 has also driven up rates of gender-based violence (GBV) across Latin America and the Caribbean, outpacing the availability of services, particularly in border areas and among populations in transit. Across the region, there are insufficient numbers of trained staff, language barriers for indigenous survivors, and xenophobic and anti-LGBTQ attitudes that impact how survivors are treated when they seek services. Regional and national humanitarian coordination platforms highlight the need for significant scaling of GBV resources including cross-border approaches and partnerships with women and refugee-led civil society and community-based organizations.

## HIAS Programs in Panama

Operational in Panama since 2010, HIAS' programs support refugees, asylum seekers, and vulnerable migrants access protection and build new lives. HIAS Panama's programs reach marginalized people including women and girls, GBV survivors, LGBTQ individuals, the elderly, and people with chronic diseases. HIAS Panama adopts a community-based approach across its programs, promoting the wellbeing of host communities and strengthening the capacity of local leaders. HIAS realizes people carry a diversity of experiences and intersecting identities requiring unique support and solutions. As such, HIAS takes a holistic approach to its interventions and offers integrated programming in GBV prevention and response, community-based mental health and psychosocial support, economic inclusion, and legal protection. In 2021, HIAS Panama reached over 10,000 program participants with comprehensive services.



HIAS MHPSS staff leading participants in an activity at the migration center in Los Planes De Gualaca, Chiriqui.

**Photo:** HIAS Panama

HIAS Panama's **mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS)** programs train community mobilizers from refugee communities on how to recognize acute emotional distress in children and adults as a result of crisis, and how to respond with empathy and respect. HIAS Panama focuses on building capacity to provide psychological first aid and also provides focused MHPSS interventions, referring individuals with acute needs who require more specialized care to partners for further assistance. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, HIAS Panama developed innovative approaches to service delivery, including the virtual, safe support line L.I.S.A. (Línea Segura de Apoyo), designed to strengthen access to affected populations and respond to their increased needs. Through this remote mechanism, HIAS Panama identifies individuals with acute mental health and psychosocial

support needs, conducts assessments to identify their specific needs, and shares resources and guidance for community integration.

HIAS Panama's comprehensive **GBV prevention and response** programming prioritizes survivors' leadership when designing and implementing activities. HIAS Panama provides case management, MHPSS services including support groups, and refers survivors for additional health and legal protection services that enable them to recover, heal, and thrive. Through risk reduction activities, such as through community protection gatherings, HIAS Panama works to mitigate the threats to women and girls that arise from unsafe living environments, unstable economic situations, or isolation. In addition, HIAS Panama implements programs that support transformative change, including programs for men and boys on positive masculinities and women's empowerment groups for adolescent girls. In the Darién, HIAS adapts its programming to meet the immediate needs of survivors, strengthening front line support and referrals for women and girls in transit and where comprehensive case management is not possible. HIAS Panama collaborates with government and non-government institutions to ensure coordinated services and address protection gaps. HIAS Panama also works to raise awareness of the rights of refugees and migrants and threats faced by women and girls and LGBTQ individuals.

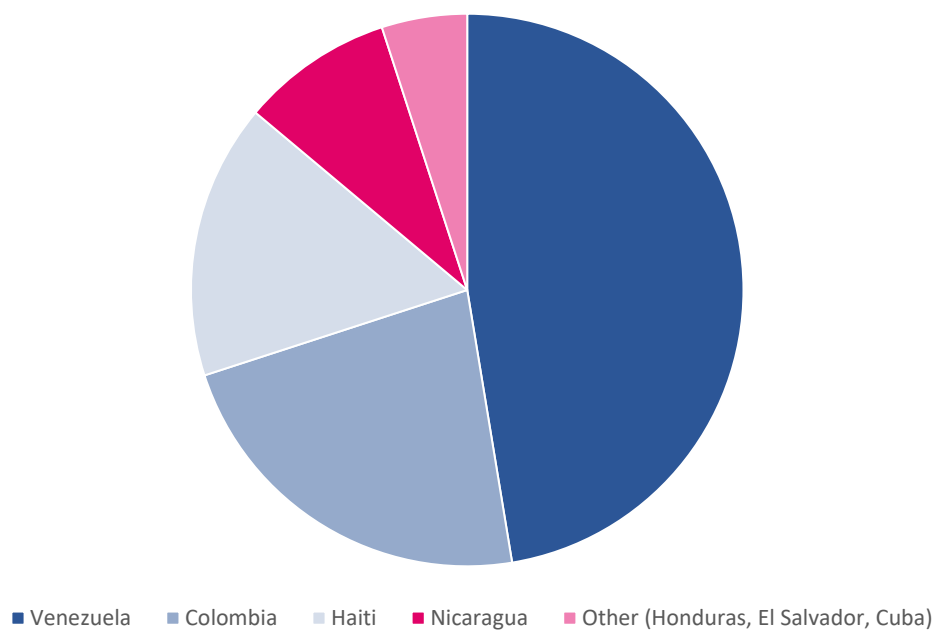


A participant in HIAS' entrepreneurship program presenting at an entrepreneurship fair during the commemoration of World Refugee Day, 2021, in Panama City. **Photo:** HIAS Panama



HIAS Panama's **economic inclusion** programs work with local communities and NGOs to promote the integration of refugees and promote their self-reliance through interventions that help them access dignified and sustainable livelihoods. HIAS Panama offers safe spaces where refugees and host community members can work collaboratively on projects and identify problems that affect their community. To address challenges faced by refugees seeking employment, including discrimination and lack of access to information and resources, HIAS Panama partners with UNHCR and the Manpower Group and the Mayor's Office of Panama to provide trainings and employment workshops through the *Talento Sin Fronteras* program. HIAS also partners with Coursera to offer refugees access to high-level courses at no cost, gaining a competitive advantage in the job market. HIAS Panama also deploys the Entrepreneurship School with a Gender Lens to promote access to capital and business training while strengthening self-esteem, autonomy, and empowerment, particularly for GBV survivors and women at risk, as well as an internship program with private sector partners.

**Graph 1: Populations Served in 2021**

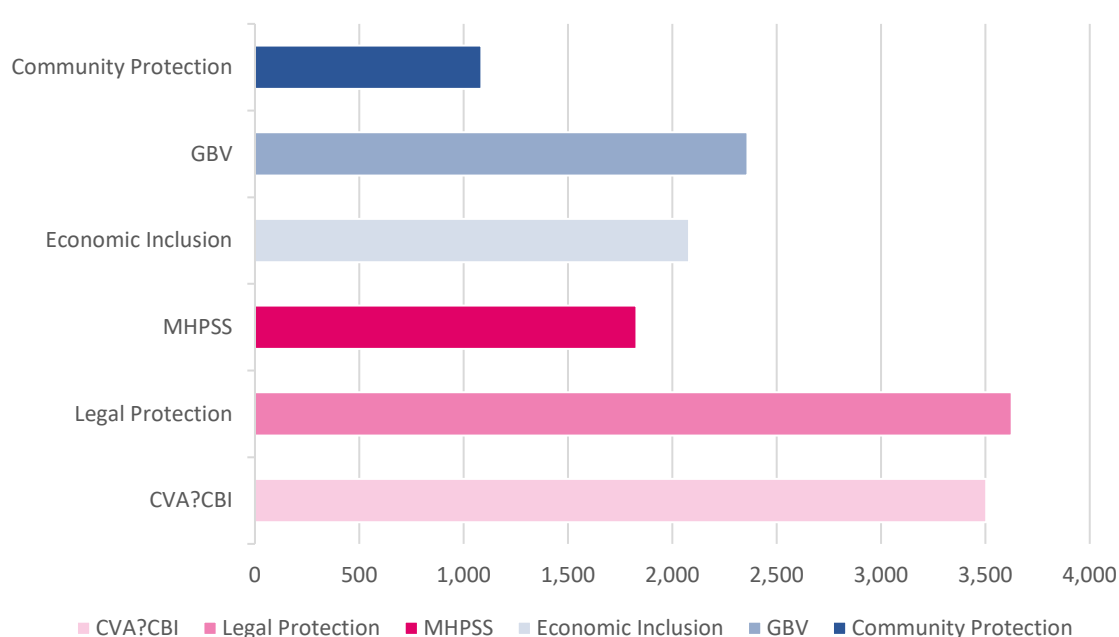


HIAS Panama implements HIAS' global **Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) Framework** and staff are trained on AAP principles and standard operating procedures. HIAS Panama displays the Code of Conduct in each office location and shares information about its accountability commitments and available services through written information and through standard operating processes for case management with clients. HIAS Panama uses feedback and response mechanisms that are accessible and context appropriate, including a confidential email address for beneficiaries to lodge complaints or provide comments and feedback.



**Looking ahead with programs,** HIAS Panama plans to continue expanding programming in the Darién to better serve remote border communities. HIAS Panama will establish **protection programming** in Bajo Chiquito to address humanitarian needs and protection gaps faced by refugees and vulnerable migrants, with a particular focus on addressing GBV and supporting unaccompanied and separated children, as well as offering MHPSS services. In addition, HIAS Panama will collaborate with the HIAS Colombia and HIAS Costa Rica teams to develop cross-border protection programs. In collaboration with HIAS' headquarters-based emergency department and the LAC Regional Office, HIAS Panama will also strengthen its capacity to respond to new emergencies.

**Graph 2: People Reached by Program Area in 2021**



## Coordination: Partners and Peer Networks

HIAS Panama works closely with the government of Panama as well as UNCHR and its partners and will continue to collaborate with international NGOs, local organizations, the private sector, and other key stakeholders supporting refugees and asylum seekers. HIAS Panama participates in national and regional humanitarian coordination working groups, shares programming data and assessments, and coordinates responses to gaps and emerging needs. HIAS Panama is a member of the coordination platform for refugees and migrants from Venezuela (R4V). At the regional level, HIAS co-chairs the protection working group of R4V with UNHCR and co-leads the GBV sub-working group with United Nations Population Fund and Save the Children. HIAS also has a regional technical agreement with UNICEF focused on adolescent girls and GBV. HIAS Panama is a member of the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS) which addresses forced displacement in Mexico and Central America, in alignment with the UN Global



HIAS MHPSS staff participating in integration activities with program participants in Los Planes De Gualaca, Chiriqui. **Photo:** HIAS Panama

Compact on Refugees. At the national level, HIAS Panama co-leads the gender and GBV working group with UNHCR, and also participates in working groups on health and protection. HIAS Panama has also signed MOUs with the municipality of Chorrera and with the National Institute of Women (INAMU). HIAS Panama also works closely with Capital Bank, Banco Pichincha, Quality Leadership University, who provide internship opportunities for refugees and migrants.

HIAS Panama will continue to build collaborative working relationships with stakeholders responding to needs in the Darién. Going forward, HIAS Panama will also expand partnerships with local organizations to promote integration and inclusion of refugees and reduce xenophobia.

## Operational Support for Programs

As HIAS' programs expand to meet new global needs, HIAS remains committed to delivering the highest quality of services to those it seeks to support and empower. To enable country teams to succeed and thrive, HIAS will invest new operational resources in our programs, processes, and people.

The HIAS Panama team is comprised of 35 staff members across three locations. The Country Director leads a Senior Management Team made up of key senior staff. Each HIAS Panama staff member abides by HIAS' Code of Conduct and other policies and procedures in line with global best practices. All staff members have completed trainings on **Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA)**. These trainings are updated and repeated regularly to ensure both prevention and response to any reported incidents of SEA. HIAS applies a gender lens when analyzing, planning, and making decisions across all its operations, to ensure the safety, security, and wellbeing of the entire organization's staff.

HIAS invests in the skills and capacity of staff worldwide, supporting a wide range of local, national, regional, and international trainings for staff. HIAS ensures that international staff have diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) training. Going forward, HIAS Panama will be mapping its staff training and capacity building needs against programmatic objectives. HIAS Panama looks forward to building staff capacity and expanding learning opportunities through exchanges with other HIAS offices in the region. HIAS Panama is also investing in individual coaching for managers and supervisors to build their skills. To promote **staff**

**wellbeing**, HIAS has a global contract with the Konterra Group, which provides support both for work-related issues and for personal reasons. The goal of these efforts is to enhance program outcomes as well as improve staff satisfaction, retention, and wellbeing across the country team.



HIAS Panama Country Director, Roberto Mera, delivering a gift to the Vice Minister Juana Lopez Córdoba, from the Ministry of Government, during a celebration for El Mes de la Patria. **Photo:** HIAS Panama

HIAS is also committed to developing an effective, sustainable **safety and security** management system that is in line with its values, mission, and organizational Duty of Care. Expanding programming in the Darién region will include a security assessment and action plan including additional training and resources for staff as necessary. HIAS Panama will continue to emphasize preventive security strategies and early detection of risk. HIAS Panama will strengthen existing tools and policies such as the acceptance strategy and continually update the overall Panama safety and security management plan. HIAS Panama's security focal point and the regional and headquarters-based Safety and Security Department work together with the Country Director and program teams to enable programming while cultivating organization-wide compliance with safety and security measures. HIAS Panama will continue to monitor the security climate in all high-risk locations and respond accordingly to changes in the security climate in areas where HIAS has operations and programming. For all new offices, such as in the Darién region, a security assessment will be carried out to identify potential gaps and take measures to address them.



Globally, HIAS is rolling out a **Digital Transformation Strategy** to ensure that beneficiaries' personal information is digitally secured and protected. The strategy will also create one universal source of information and collaboration; ensure all organizational knowledge is standardized, digitized, organized, and discoverable; ensure data around inputs, outcomes, and impact is readily accessible; help employees collaborate on gathering and building resources on this information platform; and easily share and leverage data from partners and affiliates. HIAS will be providing annual refresher training to all country offices on IT tools and procedures.

With support from headquarters (including the regional office), HIAS Panama will also continue to review and strengthen procedures and tools related to data and reporting as well as finance and compliance, in line with donor requirements and international standards. HIAS Panama will work with headquarters to establish an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system. The ERP will improve alignment of operations, finance, programs, and human resources, allowing for more efficient and cost-effective country operations.



HIAS staff providing information to vulnerable migrants and refugees in Canaan Membrillo in the region of Darién.  
**Photo:** HIAS Panama

## Donors and Development

HIAS is committed to growing and diversifying its donor base in each country of operation. With support from the LAC regional office and headquarters, HIAS Panama is developing a resource mobilization strategy to sustain, increase, and diversify funding sources, building on its reputation for comprehensive programming addressing challenges faced by refugees, asylum seekers, and vulnerable migrants in transit from across the region. HIAS Panama gratefully acknowledges support from Banesco, UNHCR, UNICEF, the UN Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture (UNVFVT), the European Union, USAID, as well as previous support from the U.S. State Department/PRM.



Moving forward, HIAS Panama plans to seek new resources and partnerships to respond to increasing need in the Darién region. HIAS Panama will also work to scale proven programming interventions, leveraging the results from ongoing research and pilot projects around the integration of GBV and MHPSS approaches. HIAS Panama also plans to develop programs in response to gaps in both GBV and child protection and will seek new partnerships with institutional donors as well as the private sector to better address key protection gaps. The private sector in Panama offers several promising opportunities to support ongoing programming and develop new interventions, with many companies having robust corporate social responsibility agendas.

## Communications, Policy, and Advocacy

HIAS Panama's advocacy targets decision-makers at all levels to advance protection and rights for refugees and asylum seekers in Panama. The aim is to comprehensively address protection gaps and implement long-term change through policy, funding, and services. Current advocacy priorities include advancing refugees' access to employment and economic opportunities, addressing GBV and protection threats faced by refugee women and girls, and promoting access to specialized services for mental health, including through public services and academic institutions. HIAS Panama leverages its participation in different national and regional working groups to advance advocacy on all these issues. HIAS Panama plans to work more closely with the private sector to help ensure refugees are seen as assets as potential employees and entrepreneurs.

To communicate with program participants about their rights and available services, affected local communities, and advance advocacy goals, HIAS Panama uses social media including Twitter and Instagram, as well as traditional media including radio and television. Regionally, HIAS works to ensure that people traveling across Latin America are aware of HIAS services and locations and other available resources across different countries, through digital and other information tools.

**Cover Photo:** HIAS Panama  
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