



RAINBOW
RAILROAD

PRIDE IMPACT REPORT



AT A GLANCE

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Cover Image: RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars winner Monét X Change works the crowd at June 8's Freedom Party, held at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum. With more than 800 attendees, the event kicked off our 2023 pride season as we came together in community to celebrate LGBTQI+ freedom.



INTRODUCTION

Each year, pride season serves as a moment of both ongoing protest and a dynamic celebration of the resilience, resourcefulness, and sheer fight that characterizes global LGBTQI+ communities. The 2023 pride season was no different - for Rainbow Railroad, the summer called us to reflect simultaneously on a current surge in state-sponsored anti-queer hostilities around the world and on a timely upswing in opportunities to rise above the onslaught. It was also a time for us to celebrate, reflect, engage, advocate, and gather together with you, our supporters, who make our work possible.

These last few months have been difficult, as we've seen rising populism, anti-LGBTQI+ sentiment, and a surge in legislation targeting LGBTQI+ people at home and abroad. Since January, over [700 anti-LGBTQI+ bills](#) have been introduced in the U.S., calling for everything from gender-



affirming care bans to the outlawing of primary and secondary school curricula aimed at educating about sexual and gender diversity.

The influence of groups who champion such legislation is being felt elsewhere in the world: In April, Arizona-based Family Watch International had an audience with Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni and co-sponsored an inter-parliamentary conference on “family values” in the East African nation. Weeks later, as widely expected, Museveni signed into law an expansion of the country’s Anti-Homosexuality Act, making consensual same-sex intimacy punishable in some cases by death, among other far-reaching measures. Uganda represents the top location from which LGBTQI+ individuals are reaching out seeking our assistance. Our response, of course, continues to be necessary and far-reaching.

Elsewhere, Rainbow Railroad is hearing of continued reports from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan of regional attacks on LGBTQI+ persons alongside other targeted groups. We recently noted the second anniversary of the fall of Kabul, and while media coverage and attention has moved elsewhere, the persecution of LGBTQI+ individuals and the necessity of our response continues. Widespread detentions, torture, disappearances, and summary executions have been [cited by United Nations experts](#) as ongoing causes of concern. In the wake of these developments, Pakistan, a chief place of initial refuge for fleeing Afghans, and Afghanistan itself represent the #3 and #4 places of residence, respectively, of those requesting help to date in 2023. In total, 6,681 LGBTQI+ Afghans have reached out to Rainbow Railroad since the fall of capital city Kabul in August 2021.

In all, Rainbow Railroad has received 9,508 requests from 169 countries since January, putting us on track to far exceed the 9,591 requests received throughout 2022. By way of response, we have provided support to more than 1,700 LGBTQI+ individuals so far in 2023 across all of our program areas.

Alongside the work of engaging our supporters and responding to the LGBTQI+ persons who reach out to us every day seeking help, Rainbow Railroad spent the summer pride season preparing to optimize historic new opportunities. At our June 8 Toronto Freedom Party, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, alongside Canadian government officials, publicly announced that Rainbow Railroad has been named a direct refugee referral partner with the Government of Canada. A major policy win for us, this arrangement potentially paves the way for a more efficient response to resettlement requests in Canada.

We continue our push to maximize resettlement pathways in the U.S. as well, and we currently are building out ways to support the Biden-Harris Administration's new Welcome Corps program. Designed to expand private refugee sponsorships in the U.S., Welcome Corps represents a heartening point of federal government cooperation, offsetting some of the distressing legal activity seen at the state level.

We invite you to read on in this report to learn more about these developments - and how we are responding with your valued support.



A HISTORIC PARTNERSHIP

“The partnership makes Rainbow Railroad the first LGBTQI+-specific body to be named a direct referral partner to any national government in the world.”

AS THE NUMBER of annual requests for help received by Rainbow Railroad grows, the need for ready and reliable resettlement pathways is ever more critical to our Emergency Travel Support function. In the face of this growing need, the Government of Canada announced in June that Rainbow Railroad has been named a direct referral partner under its Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) program.

The partnership, announced by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and former Canadian immigration minister Sean Fraser at Toronto’s June 8 Freedom Party, marks the fulfillment of one of our most significant policy goals to date, one for which we have been actively advocating over numerous years. The collaboration empowers Rainbow Railroad for the first time to identify and refer refugee claimants en masse to the Canadian government for resettlement.

“Everyone deserves a safe place to call home, and Canada continues to be a destination of choice for people looking to start a new life with new opportunities for them and their families,” said Trudeau in a June 8 press release. “Together with Rainbow Railroad, we will help LGBTQI+ people start a new, safe chapter here in Canada.” The partnership makes us the first civil society agency beyond the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to enjoy a direct referral relationship with the Canadian government as part of the GAR program and the first LGBTQI+-specific body to be named such a partner to any national government in the world.



Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau meets with Rainbow Railroad team members to discuss partnered LGBTQI+ refugee resettlements.

The partnership enables us to refer highly vulnerable LGBTQI+ persons from countries where we have had little to no success before, given the complexity of international travel restrictions affecting certain parts of the world. Having a direct “in” with the government will enable us to more closely coordinate in time-sensitive situations.

While the direct referral partnership with Canada is a first for Rainbow Railroad, advocating for similar relationships with other governments around the world has been a priority for several years. Direct referral partnership is **one of three key recommendations** (along with an increase in LGBTQI+ refugee admissions and a review of migrant detentions) we have made to the U.S. Biden-Harris Administration since 2021.

Partnership with the Canadian government has been vital to a number of interventions throughout our organizational history:

- In 2017, we worked closely with the Canadian government to coordinate an emergency response to violent anti-queer crackdowns in Chechnya.
- In 2019, we played an instrumental role in making permanent the Rainbow Refugee Assistance Program, Canada’s private sponsorship program, which had been active since 2011 as a pilot project.
- Last year our appeals to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada garnered a commitment to resettle nearly 900 LGBTQI+ Afghans across two resettlement pipelines, our largest resettlement efforts to date.

Made possible through donor and partner support, these activities have helped establish our expertise in increasingly complex and larger-scale refugee support work and have been foundational to winning our direct referral partner status in Canada.

CRISIS RESPONSE: AFGHANISTAN & UGANDA

While reports of hostilities against LGBTQI+ communities around the world pour in at an alarming rate, developments in several countries are exceptionally worrying. Rainbow Railroad continues to stage robust responses to many crisis regions, with two countries - Afghanistan and Uganda - currently calling for significant focus.



AFGHANISTAN

The two-year anniversary of the Taliban's violent takeover of Afghanistan (which happened in August 2021) represents an important time to look at the ongoing situation, and our response so far. The country has remained among the top states of origin for those requesting Rainbow Railroad's help. So far this year, 1,749 LGBTQI+ Afghans have reached out to Rainbow Railroad, on top of 3,044 in 2022.

Throughout the duration of our response, we have provided 648 Afghans with financial assistance, shelter support, mental healthcare, and other forms of assistance. As well, we have facilitated the evacuation of 247 Afghans to safer countries, with Canada receiving the largest share of newcomers. We know this is a drop in the bucket, however, and have continually advocated for a larger pipeline enabling us to provide support to LGBTQI+ refugees in urgent need of evacuation.

In December 2022 our advocacy paid off, with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) committing to resettle 627 Afghans in Canada. We have submitted 330 applications (for 622 individuals), and our crisis response team is actively working to prepare these folks for relocation by ensuring they meet all IRCC requirements.



In July, Rainbow Railroad team members convened in Bangkok with the Asian arm of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans & Intersex Association to discuss the situation for LGBTQI+ Afghans.

In addition, we continue to work with regional partners to facilitate the safe passage of Afghan refugees first to Pakistan (as required by the IRCC), where they find refuge in safe houses pending their ultimate resettlement to safety in Canada. Individuals requiring medical care are attended to in the safe houses, with support from Rainbow Railroad.

In July, Rainbow Railroad and the Asian arm of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans & Intersex Association hosted a strategic convening in Bangkok on the situation for LGBTQI+ Afghans. The event was attended by representatives from the U.S. and

Canadian governments, stakeholders from Afghan-led organizations, and representatives from more than 15 LGBTQI+ organizations from the U.S., UK, Germany, Pakistan, and Thailand. The convening focused on consolidating our advocacy efforts, exchanging best practices, and maximizing both government-assisted resettlements and private refugee sponsorships as complementary evacuation options.

We continue to monitor the crisis in Afghanistan. In the coming weeks, we will be releasing a report to share key findings and strategic actions planned in response to developments in the region.

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COMMUNITIES OF CARE: SUPPORTING WELCOME CORPS IN THE U.S.

IN JANUARY, the U.S. Department of State announced the launch of Welcome Corps, a government program that supports everyday Americans interested in privately sponsoring refugees from around the world. On the heels of the announcement, Rainbow Railroad is thrilled to declare our commitment aimed at extending the program's benefits to the LGBTQI+ refugee community through our own supportive initiative - Communities of Care.

Through Communities of Care, Rainbow Railroad will provide training, tools, LGBTQI+ networking support, and other resources to individuals and groups interested in stepping up, doing their part, and helping an LGBTQI+ refugee get to safety in their community.

Communities of Care groups provide a sense of welcome and inclusion to newcomers and help them to navigate employment, education enrollment, healthcare or legal services, language support, and government assistance. These groups may be widely diverse, comprising any five American citizens or permanent residents, age 18+, living in the same community. Rainbow Railroad is committed to providing support with securing affordable housing and offering direct financial assistance to LGBTQI+ refugees resettled in this program - all made possible by generous donors.



“Welcome Corps is a unique opportunity to advance freedom and safety for other LGBTQI+ people, to mobilize our community, and to change someone's life forever.”

We also will be partnering with local agencies in communities where LGBTQI+ refugees will resettle. These organizations may be varied, representing cultural or faith-based groups, professional associations, fraternities or sororities, corporate teams, schools, and other institutions. They will coordinate with volunteers and provide regional expertise to support successful resettlement outcomes.

Throughout 2023, Rainbow Railroad is focusing on cultivating and empowering groups in three pilot cities: San Francisco, Chicago, and Washington D.C. We are hosting strategic consultations with LGBTQI+ community members in these cities to build support for Welcome Corps and to connect participants to useful queer-sensitive resource and service providers. Additional focus cities will be incrementally added.

“As a welcoming city with a vibrant LGBTQI+ community and organizations deeply rooted in serving the refugee population, Chicago is an ideal place to pilot this project,” says Bruce Koff, Chair of Rainbow Railroad U.S.A. and a Chicagoan.

“My husband and I are thrilled to build our own welcoming team here, and we encourage others to do the same. It is a unique opportunity to advance freedom and safety for other LGBTQI+ people, to mobilize our community, and to change someone's life forever.”

Welcome Corps represents a significant step towards increased LGBTQI+ refugee admissions to the U.S. and fuller implementation of the Biden-Harris Administration's 2021 [Memorandum on Advancing the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex Persons Around the World](#).

We hope to move as many as 50 LGBTQI+ refugees in the initial stages of this program, with a consideration on how to help more in future.

We will be providing updates on Welcome Corps and the Communities of Care program. To stay in the know, sign up at rainbowrailroad.org/welcomecorps or email us at community@rainbowrailroad.org.

A portrait of Brayo Bryans, a Black man with a beard and glasses, wearing a black hat, a black leather vest over a black shirt, and a long, thick, brown and black dreadlock scarf. He is standing against a solid red background, with his hands clasped in front of him.

BRAYO BRYANS' STORY

Central to Rainbow Railroad's work is the recognition that we are an organization that enables heroes of various sorts to thrive safely. One such hero is Brayo Bryans.

Brayo's journey started in Kampala, Uganda, where he grew up with his single mother. Early on, he discovered a passion and gift for music and dance, and he also realized he was gay, a difficult reality in a society where this is taboo. For years, Brayo concealed his truth from everyone, even his mother.

In 2004, Brayo met respected Ugandan activist Frank Mugisha (also a partner of Rainbow Railroad), a turning point that sparked not only a close friendship but a powerful partnership in service to Uganda's at-risk LGBTQI+ community. With a shared purpose they created Icebreakers, a social group that provided a safe space for LGBTQI+ young people to have open and honest conversations about their experiences and challenges.

The growing group would soon become known for its dynamic events and projects under the banner organization Sexual Minorities Uganda. Their work sparked the inception of the "Let Us Be" campaign, a bold initiative aimed at making the LGBTQI+ community more visible in Uganda.

But visibility also came with backlash. While taking part in the 2007 Kampala Film Festival, the activists were ambushed and forcibly outed in the media. Brayo suffered public humiliation, causing him to drop out of university. The news of his sexuality also affected his mother, who was ostracized socially.

Threats escalated, leading Brayo to seek refuge in Nairobi, Kenya. There, despite silently battling depression, he contributed to the formation of UHAI (Kiswahili for "life"), a fund benefiting the work of East African LGBTQI+ organizations, and Talented Ugandan Kuchus, a collective spotlighting the artistry of young queer Ugandans at home and abroad. Brayo returned to Uganda to fight the Anti-Homosexuality Bill of 2014, colloquially known at the time as the "Kill the Gays" Bill. (It was ultimately made law.) In subsequent years, he experienced life-threatening attacks, ultimately causing him to reach out to Rainbow Railroad in 2019 for assistance. He was quickly relocated to Canada.

Now in Toronto, Brayo's creative passions have flourished. During the isolation of the COVID-19

pandemic, he self-released an album, Lockdown. In 2022, he joined the queer record label So Fierce Music, and has released singles "Now That I'm Here" and "Break the Spell." He has performed at several Rainbow Railroad events, including this year's Toronto Freedom Party, and he expects to graduate this fall from film school.

Brayo explains that whether through music or film, his artistic sensibilities are underpinned by a passion to speak truth to power and to inspire other people to do the same. "My biggest goal is to spread love - worldwide - through my talents," he says.

Brayo thanks Rainbow Railroad's supporters for enabling the work that has given him a chance at a luminous future - and he reminds us that only through ongoing support can we collectively provide similar hope to those LGBTQI+ persons still critically vulnerable around the world.

For a more in-depth look at Brayo Bryans' work or to listen to his music, visit brayobryans.com.

"My biggest goal is to spread love - worldwide - through my talents."

UGANDA

Just over three months ago, President Yoweri Museveni signed Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act 2023 (AHA23) into law. Since then, more and more LGBTQI+ people in the country have become internally displaced - meaning they are effectively uprooted from their homes and on the run. Reports of community harassment, discrimination in housing, and evictions have become frequent, and requests for help originating in Uganda have increased sharply. So far this year, we have received 1,047 requests, with 91 percent of those coming since the adoption of the AHA23 in May. Against our total of 392 in the whole of 2022, this represents a stark increase.

Our response so far has included supporting the evacuation of individuals to safety within Uganda, while we continue to advocate for a durable pathway to safety for LGBTQI+ Ugandans outside of their country as needed.



Rainbow Railroad CEO Kimahli Powell visited Uganda this summer to liaise with partners around the ongoing response to the country's anti-LGBTQI+ crisis.



Our relationship with more than 30 partners on the ground in Uganda is crucial to our response to the crisis. In addition to this increase in the typical number of partners with which we work, we have increased the level of funding available to them. So far we have referred six at-risk Human Rights defenders in Uganda to ProtectDefenders.eu for suggested Canadian resettlement and, in collaboration with Sexual Minorities Uganda and other partners, we have secured the release of 152 people who have been imprisoned under the anti-gay law, established safe houses in rural areas, and provided cash assistance to those at risk. Further, to ease undue administrative burdens on local service providers who've applied for funding under our Partnership Development program, we are reducing the frequency with which we expect them to report back to us.

Alignment with a wide range of partners and concerted appeals to key decision makers are also integral to our response strategy. In June, Rainbow

Railroad helped coordinate Toronto- and Ottawa-area public discussions and information-sharing meetings attended by Ugandan parliamentarians, representatives of Human Rights groups from across Africa, Canadian government officials, and Jessica Stern, U.S. Special Envoy to Advance the Human Rights of LGBTQI+ Persons. Bringing together our international partners and Special Envoy Stern was strategic, as it both shows the impact of the position in the U.S. and encourages the adoption of a parallel office in Canada.

Our CEO, Kimahli Powell, made a trip to Uganda this summer to liaise with local partners, engage with the community on the ground, and to learn how our continued response can be most impactful.

In collaboration with our partners, we currently are focused on supporting appeals to Uganda's Supreme Court to dismiss AHA23, and we have provided funding to allied Ugandan parliamentarian Fox Odoi-

Oywelowo to draft a minority report – a mechanism required to mount future legal challenges to the law. We are heartened that United Nations Human Rights experts have [cited AHA23](#) as possibly in violation of international Human Rights covenants, and we continue to monitor an upswing in defiant aggressions against LGBTQI+ Ugandans since the [World Bank's announcement in August](#) they would suspend support to Uganda pending a review of the law.

For more information about our work in these and other countries, contact donations@rainbowrailroad.org.



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