

Pittsburgh's Synagogue Shooter May Have Targeted HIAS on Social Media. Here's What to Know About the Organization

BY **ALEJANDRO DE LA GARZA**

UPDATED: OCTOBER 29, 2018 1:23 PM ET | ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED: OCTOBER 28, 2018

Suspected Pittsburgh shooter [Robert Bowers](#), in an alleged social media post on the platform [Gab](#), targeted HIAS, bringing attention to the organization and its longstanding commitment to refugees.

What is HIAS?

[HIAS](#), founded as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, is one of nine major faith-based and secular organizations that work with the federal government to help resettle refugees in the United States. Abroad, the HIAS also works to provide legal protection, psychological care and economic opportunities to displaced people, as well as to advocate for their legal rights.

Founded in 1881, HIAS's original purpose was to help Jewish people fleeing widespread violent persecution in Russia and Eastern Europe. The organization established a shelter in New York City's Lower East Side that provided dormitory space, a soup kitchen and clothing to Jewish immigrants in need. HIAS also sought to help Jewish immigrants arriving at New York's Ellis Island, providing translation services, assisting immigrants with medical screenings, and running a kosher kitchen, among other services.

In the second half of the 19th century, HIAS worked to help Jewish people fleeing violence and persecution all over the world. The organization helped those from Egypt expelled during the Sinai campaign in 1956, and those who left Czechoslovakia after the post-Prague Spring suppression in 1968. After the

fall of Saigon in 1975, HIAS also assisted with the resettlement of non-Jewish refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. By the 2000s, HIAS had formally expanded their resettlement work to assist refugees of all faiths and origins all over the world.

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What does HIAS do now?

Though HIAS now assists refugees of any faith and ethnic origin, the group says its work is still tied to its original founding values.

“Our position in recent years is that we used to be an organization that helped refugees because they were Jewish, and now we help refugees because we are Jewish,” says Bill Swersey, a spokesperson for the HIAS. “Many American Jews feel this is a very strong expression of Jewish values, as a people who have known what it is to be a refugee throughout our history”

Though HIAS works with the Department of State, the organization has no discretion over which refugees it assists within the U.S., much less which are admitted to the country. “Through [The US Refugee Admissions Program] we resettle whoever the State Department is bringing in as refugees, which is a very wide range of people without regard to race, religion, nationality or anything else,” says Swersey.

According to recent numbers released by the [UN Refugee Agency](#), there is currently a record 68.5 million displaced people around the world, with 16.2

million people displaced either for the first time or repeatedly in 2017. Many were uprooted by the past year's violence in Syria and Yemen, or by ethnic cleansing in Myanmar.

“The crisis is huge, and it's gotten worse over the last few years,” says Swersey. “The world is continuing to create refugees, and it's a problem that we think should continue to be addressed.”

How does HIAS factor into Pittsburgh's synagogue shooting?

Based on social media posts by an account with the same name as the suspected Pittsburgh shooter, Bowers's race-based opposition to HIAS's mission may have been behind his Oct 27 rampage at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh that left 11 dead.

The [final post on the Gab account](#) allegedly accused HIAS of bringing “invaders in that kill our people,” highlighting an opposition to refugee placement in the U.S.

For HIAS, acts of violence like Bowers' will not deter the organization from its mission. “We're doing everything we can to ensure that we can continue to do our work safely as we did before,” says Swersey. “This is the right thing to do, it's an important thing to do, and we're going to keep doing it.”