



The Quiet Trail: Oregon's Hidden Humanitarian Crisis

By Mila Shelehoff

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Across Central Oregon, Ukrainian families who fled war are discovering that refuge can have an expiration date — and the consequences ripple through our schools, neighborhoods, and moral conscience.

Prologue: The Teddy Bear Test

*Imagine carrying your child's favorite teddy bear through a war zone —
not because it can protect them,
but because it might make them smile again.*

Now imagine arriving in a new country — exhausted, hopeful, and believing that smile will finally last. You find a job. You enroll your child in school. You start to breathe differently, to believe that the quiet outside your window means peace, not danger.

*And then, one morning, a letter arrives —
a government notice stamped "no longer eligible."*

That sound — paper tearing open what you thought was safety — is echoing quietly across Oregon today. Not in headlines, not in protests, but in kitchens where mothers pray over coffee before waking their children, in schools where laughter hides the fear of what happens next, in families who believed, just for a moment, that they had finally reached home.

The Unraveling Promise

If you live in Bend, you may have already met them — a mother at the bus stop, a father fixing a neighbor's deck, a child on the soccer field speaking a soft mix of English and Ukrainian.

These are the families who fled bombs and blockades with nothing but passports and hope. They arrived in Central Oregon with trembling hands and open hearts, told they had found safety. Two years later, many are discovering that the door that once opened for them is slowly swinging shut.

Across the country — and here in Bend, Redmond, Madras, and Sisters — Ukrainian families who came under the *Uniting for Ukraine* (U4U) program are facing a quiet crisis. Their humanitarian parole, the temporary legal protection that allowed them to live and work safely in the United States, is expiring.

When that happens, so do the supports that made survival possible — food assistance, healthcare, and work authorization. For some, the renewal process is confusing and delayed. For others, it never comes. Without that paperwork, parents can't work. Without income, they can't pay rent. And without food or healthcare, safety itself begins to unravel.¹

No one is talking about it loudly. But it's happening right here — in our schools, our workplaces, our neighborhoods.

What's Actually Happening

The U4U program, launched in April of 2022, offered Ukrainians fleeing Russia's full-scale invasion two years of lawful stay in the U.S., work authorization, and limited access to safety-net supports. It was designed as emergency refuge, not permanence—yet few families imagined rebuilding their lives in two-year increments.

As those protections roll off, the ground is shifting. On Oct. 1, 2025, Oregon began applying new federal SNAP rules tied to H.R. 1, expanding ABAWD work requirements and triggering benefit reviews. The Oregon Department of Human Services has warned that thousands of Oregonians—including some non-citizens who were previously eligible—will lose SNAP in October/November 2025.

On the immigration side, USCIS implemented a new \$1,000 parole fee for FY2025 (with annual inflation adjustments) required by H.R. 1—paid at the time of parole—in addition to standard USCIS filing fees such as those for employment authorization.

Meanwhile, families are seeing coverage uncertainty as temporary statuses lapse, and many face processing delays on work-permit renewals, leaving households in limbo without income during gaps. For most, returning to Ukraine is unthinkable: cities like Mariupol, Kharkiv, and Nikopol remain at risk, with homes destroyed and regions heavily militarized. Policies that once offered a lifeline now risk expiring faster than the war they fled.

This isn't a partisan dispute; it's a community test. The question isn't whether families deserve help—but whether we, as Oregonians, will honor the promise of refuge made when they arrived.

The Long Shadow of Removal

America has walked this road before.

In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, later enforced by Martin Van Buren, forcing entire Indigenous nations — Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee, and Seminole — from their homelands. It was justified as “reform,” “order,” and “progress.” The result was death and displacement: the *Trail of Tears*.

That logic — of removing people under the language of necessity — is older than our republic, and it returns in modern form.

Today, we don't call it removal. We call it expiration. We call it compliance. We call it policy. But for families living it, the effect is the same: being uprooted again, by systems that mistake paperwork for justice.

Once more, those who trusted this land for safety are being told: *You cannot stay*.

Between Home and the Unknown: The Faces of UHPs

Between what was left behind and what is still becoming, there is a fragile space called everyday life.

Here, in the quiet of the Cascades, mothers like Olena and Yuliia wake before dawn — one to pray, one to call her family across an ocean — both listening for the sound of peace.

Their children are learning new words, new laughter, new ways of belonging. They carry skis instead of suitcases now, schoolbooks instead of travel papers. The air still carries memory, but the mornings carry hope.

Each day begins the same: coffee, backpacks, a whispered thank you that the roof still holds, the work permit still counts, the silence still means safety.

Between policy letters and school drop-offs, between rules that change and neighbors who show up anyway, something stronger than status is taking root — a kind of community that grows not from law, but from care.

And perhaps this is where the truest Oregon begins — not the one measured by boundaries, but by how gently we hold those who have lost theirs.

Olena Vasylenko: “Safety Is When the Soul Is Quiet”

When Olena talks about safety, she doesn't describe paperwork or policies. She talks about silence.

“Safety,” she says, “is when your soul finally stops shaking. It's when nothing is tearing your heart apart.”

For months after the invasion, that silence didn't exist. Her family lived under the constant sound of air-raid sirens and shelling near Nikopol, a city repeatedly hit by missiles. When they finally arrived in Oregon, the quiet was almost startling. “We just wanted to be in peace,” she says. “Because in silence, it's easier to hear God.”

In Bend, that peace took shape through kindness. Their neighbors became, in her words, “*our big Ukrainian-American family*.” They call them by name: Bob and Trudy, Renee and Michael, Terry and Maureen. “They give my children love and attention every day,” Olena says. Her husband, Denys, who grew up never knowing his father, found one here — in their neighbor Terry. “They spend hours in the garage, fixing things. It heals something deep in both of them.”

Each morning, Olena begins with prayer before driving her children to school and heading to her job as an office assistant. “Everything I have, I have because people helped us,” she says. Their American sponsor covered airfare, rent, and even offered work to help them get started.

Now, Olena fears that the quiet she worked so hard to build is slipping away. Their food benefits have been cut off, and her work permit will soon expire. She worries about how to feed her children, how to pay the rent, how to explain to them why the world feels uncertain again.

“There is nothing more beautiful,” she says, “than watching a wounded soul open its wings again. I just pray the world will let my children keep flying.”

Yuliia Hryhorenko: “We Wanted Our Children to Laugh”

For Yuliia, safety has always meant something simple — the sound of laughter.

“When we came to Oregon in December 2023,” she says, “we just wanted our children to go to school without sirens, to play, to laugh, to live.”

Her family’s journey from Salem to Bend was fueled by hope — and by snow. Her teenage daughter is a Nordic skier, and joining the MBSEF Youth Program gave her something to look forward to again. “This city is full of active people,” Yuliia says. “It felt like home from the very first day.”

Their days now look like many families’ across Central Oregon: work, school, practices, dinner, sleep. “Every morning, I call my family in Ukraine,” she says. “I just need to hear their voices, to know they survived the night.” Then it’s off to work, back home for her son’s ski or swim practice, then English classes at night. “I don’t have a big circle of friends here,” she admits, “but the ones I have — they make sure I don’t lose heart.”

Her voice trembles when she talks about her hopes for her children. “I just want them to laugh. I want them to ride bikes, to make friends, to grow up without fear. I want them to feel like they belong.”

When asked what she wants her Oregon neighbors to know, she pauses. “We are not that different,” she says. “We are just parents who want safety for our children — the same thing everyone wants.”

A Family in Numbers

Before the cuts, Olena and her husband kept their family of six afloat on a modest but steady income. Olena worked full-time as an office assistant, earning about \$3,466 a month after taxes, and the family received roughly \$1,500 in food assistance. Their combined monthly budget—just under \$5,000—covered rent, utilities, gas, car payments, insurance, and groceries. What remained—about \$1,000—was their small “rainy day” cushion, a fragile sense of security in an uncertain world. They lived simply: no luxuries, just the basics.

That balance disappeared in October 2025, when the family’s food benefits were cut off, eliminating their only margin for savings. But that was only the beginning. In March 2026, both their humanitarian parole and work permits will expire. Renewing them will cost \$2,350 per

person—including for their four children—more than \$14,000 in total, due within months. During the lengthy renewal process, which can take up to a year, Olena and Denys will lose her legal right to work—leaving the family with no income at all.

Even without paychecks, the bills will remain: rent, utilities, groceries, gas. Their small savings will vanish within weeks, and the \$14,000 renewal fee could erase whatever stability is left.

This is what “expiration” looks like in real life—a family that once stood on its own suddenly forced to choose between paying rent and paying to remain. It isn’t failure; it’s the predictable result of a system that ends protection before it offers a path forward.

What It Means for Oregon

When humanitarian parole ends, it doesn’t just affect the families who receive the letters.

It affects the classrooms that lose bright, bilingual students — children who have already learned how to start over and now tutor their peers in courage. It affects local employers who lose skilled workers, mechanics, translators, and teachers who contribute daily to Oregon’s workforce. It affects faith communities that lose volunteers and friends who show up early to brew the coffee and stay late to sweep the floor. And it affects our collective integrity as a region known for its welcome — a place that has always prided itself on generosity and grit.

Humanitarian parole was never meant to be permanent, but it was meant to protect. It was a promise that safety here would not vanish as suddenly as it did at home. Now, that promise is cracking — not out of malice, but out of neglect, bureaucracy, and silence.

What kind of community will we be if we allow our newest neighbors to slip quietly into poverty and uncertainty — not because of failure or fault, but because of expired papers?

The irony is that these families already give more than they receive. They teach, build, coach, volunteer, and repair. They enrich our schools, our economy, and our culture. To lose them is to lose part of Oregon’s living story — the human thread that keeps this state vibrant, creative, and whole.

The truth is, these stories are everywhere. They’re woven into our daily routines — the mother helping with carpool, the dad fixing your windows, the children at your school’s science fair. Most of us simply don’t know how close the crisis already is.

A Call to Keep the Promise

This is not an abstract debate about borders or budgets. It's about people we already know — the families in our neighborhoods, the children sitting next to ours in class. Central Oregon can lead where federal policy falters. We can speak with one voice to urge our representatives to extend humanitarian protections, restore access to food and healthcare, and speed up the renewal of work authorizations.

Local nonprofits like Art Sprouts (ASI) and state-supported programs like Oregon Refugee Children Assistance Services (ORCAS) are already responding to the gaps — offering trauma-informed care, arts-based healing, language navigation, and community connection. But they cannot do it alone. Here's what we can do:

- ☐ Write to your state and federal representatives to support continued humanitarian parole and benefits for displaced families.
- ☐ Volunteer or donate to local groups serving refugee and immigrant communities.
- ☐ Speak up at school, city, and county meetings. Ask what plans are in place to support students whose legal status is at risk.
- ☐ Share these stories — in classrooms, workplaces, and places of worship. Visibility is not charity; it's civic duty.
- ☐ Ask questions when you are unsure.

Each letter written, each conversation started, each act of awareness adds weight to the moral side of the scale. Because silence, too, is a form of removal. Oregon has always stood for pioneers — not only those who crossed mountains, but those who dared to imagine something better on the other side. That spirit of courage and care is still ours to uphold.

The Choice Before Us

History offers a mirror, and this time we cannot claim we didn't see. The quiet removal unfolding now will not leave the same kind of scars as the Trail of Tears, but it carries the same moral weight — the slow erasure of those who trusted us with their lives. We are being asked, once again, what kind of trail we will walk — one paved with compassion or compliance. The promise of Oregon — and of America — must not end with an expiration date. We can choose

differently. We can choose to keep faith with the families who believed us when we said, *you are safe here*. Because the cost of this quiet removal will not only be theirs — it will be ours. And the legacy we build today will define what Oregon's trail stands for tomorrow.

The Trail Ahead

The trail ahead will not be marked by wagon ruts or map lines, but by choices — quiet, everyday decisions made in classrooms, offices, and kitchens across Oregon. It winds through PTA meetings and grocery aisles, over soccer fields and into the small, unseen acts that hold a community together. Each gesture of welcome, each policy that protects, each neighbor who chooses to notice — these are the steps that redraw the map. If the Oregon Trail once carried seekers westward in search of promise, this new trail carries us inward, toward the heart of who we are.

Author's Note

The reference to the *Trail of Tears* in this piece is offered not as comparison but as reflection — a recognition that the logic of displacement has resurfaced across centuries in new forms. This essay honors Indigenous histories of removal in Oregon and beyond, acknowledging that today's humanitarian crises unfold on land shaped by those earlier injustices.

Submission Package

Summary for Editors (60 words):

In this commentary, Bend advocate Mila Shelehoff exposes a quiet humanitarian crisis in Central Oregon. As humanitarian parole protections for Ukrainian families expire, the promise of refuge is dissolving into uncertainty. Through the stories of local families, she shows how federal inaction is reshaping Oregon classrooms, workplaces, and the very definition of community.

Author Bio (40 words):

Mila Shelehoff is a Ukrainian-born mother, writer, and community advocate based in Bend, Oregon. She directs the KOLOVITA Initiative through Art Sprouts, Inc., supporting displaced families with culturally responsive care, storytelling, and community connection across rural Central Oregon.