

Groups resettling refugees fight for survival

Hundreds of U.S.-based workers have lost their jobs in the past year. Many of them are refugees themselves.

by [Jack Jenkins](#) and [Emily McFarlan Miller](#)

This article appears in the [March 14, 2018](#) issue.



A refugee family received by World Relief Seattle in 2016. Photo by Amanda Wingers/World Relief.

Eight years ago, John Giri, a refugee from Bhutan, came to the United States and then began to help others resettle in this country.

After working for a tortilla company in Atlanta, he landed a job as an interpreter for World Relief, the same evangelical Christian organization that had helped him adapt to life in the United States after almost 20 years in a refugee camp in Nepal.

“I came as a refugee—I know the process,” he said. “I have been through all the difficulties of life in a refugee camp and know what it is to be a refugee.”

Giri, a Baptist, was eventually promoted to case manager. But all that came to a screeching halt in March 2017, when Giri and nine of his coworkers were abruptly laid off.

“I was angry,” he said—angry with his employer but also with the Trump administration. “My frustration was over the change of policies and change in government.”

Giri is one of hundreds of resettlement workers—many of them refugees themselves—who have lost their jobs as a result of the Trump administration’s various versions of a travel ban. Resettlement agencies have been left on the hook to pay for empty apartments and have had to explain to interested churches why they can’t bring refugees to their areas. Many refugee advocates have expressed concern over how long it will take the agencies to come back from those cuts, if they can at all.

Trump administration officials said in late January they would once again allow refugees from countries named in the bans—which have accounted for more than 40 percent of refugee admissions over the last three years, according to State Department data—as long as the newcomers undergo additional vetting. President Trump has also slashed the total number of refugees who will be admitted, from 110,000 in fiscal 2017 to 45,000 in fiscal 2018, which started in October. Agencies say they aren’t on track to settle even that number: just over 6,000 had come into the country in the last three months. The State Department declined requests for an interview.

Hidden behind these figures is the decimation of an expansive refugee resettlement apparatus composed largely of faith-based nonprofit organizations that have partnered with the federal government for decades. Of the nine organizations helping refugees find a home in the United States, six have a religious affiliation: World Relief, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Church World Service, HIAS (founded as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, and Episcopal Migration Ministries.

Historically, these organizations have had contracts with the government to take in refugees after they undergo a lengthy application and vetting process that involves

several agencies, including the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security. The placement of families is determined on a weekly basis through consultation between the State Department and the resettlement agencies. Groups typically provide new arrivals with housing and food, as well as long-term assistance for achieving self-sufficiency such as help in finding jobs, learning English, and applying to become permanent U.S. residents or citizens.

The harm inflicted on the resettlement program by the Trump administration is difficult to calculate. Each organization is structured differently, and many partner with independent local groups.

- World Relief announced within weeks of the initial ban that it will lay off more than 140 employees—about one-fifth of its U.S.-based staff—and close five of its local offices.
- HIAS reported it is in the process of closing sites in Los Angeles and Chicago and has halted plans to open others.
- A Church World Service official said its small national-level staff is largely intact but predicted all of its partner offices will have to lay off at least one employee in 2018.
- USCCB officials said they expect to close about 15 of 75 sites this year. Catholic Charities, the primary affiliate for the USCCB's resettlement work, said that of the 700 full-time employees across its network who work on refugee resettlement, more than 300 are estimated to see a temporary layoff, permanent layoff, or possible reassignment due to the refugee ban.
- Episcopal News Service reported that the Episcopal Church will cut its 31-member affiliate network by six in 2018.
- Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service said it has not closed any sites, though it has made staff reductions at its headquarters.

Local organizations appear to bear the brunt of the cuts. Paula Torisk, deputy director of refugee resettlement for Catholic Charities San Antonio, said her office has laid off at least 23 people because of the various bans—30 to 35 percent of her staff. Many of those who lost their jobs are refugees or former refugees who have since become U.S. citizens.

"I've always looked at this program like being on a roller coaster ride, but this has been a year like no other," she said.

Jen Smyers, director of policy and advocacy for the CWS Immigration and Refugee Program, said that after the initial ban came down, several CWS affiliates were left with empty apartments furnished for refugees who may never arrive. Since the federal government only offers additional funds once a refugee is physically at a site, she said local groups were forced to figure out what to do, sometimes paying the cost themselves.

Smyers said that for all nine organizations in 2017, there were more than 20,000 cases where refugees did not arrive despite signed agreements with the State Department to resettle them.

Yet agency officials see signs of hope. CWS reported its volunteer base has quadrupled, while donations to World Relief from churches, individuals, and nongovernmental sources have nearly doubled over the past two years. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service's revenue from the private sector increased by more than 105 percent from 2016 to 2017.

There is "a hunger out there" in people wanting to learn more about refugees: who they are, what they've been through, and what they face coming to the United States and other countries, said E. Mark Stevenson, director of Episcopal Migration Ministries. "That to me is the real bright light in this."

The problem is how to handle the surge in interest. Mark Hetfield, president and CEO of HIAS, said local partners have "hundreds of volunteers lined up with no refugees arriving, or very few. . . . It just shows you the great capacity this country has to welcome refugees, and that capacity is going unmet."

HIAS is listed as a plaintiff in multiple lawsuits filed against the ban, including the case brought before the Fourth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which ruled February 15 that the Trump directive is likely unconstitutional. (The ruling is largely symbolic, as the U.S. Supreme Court has allowed the ban to take effect while it is brought before the justices.)

Even with such efforts, the path forward for the resettlement agencies remains unclear. World Relief has "felt a sense of confusion at least" from the people in the evangelical Christian churches it works with over the stance of a president who claims to represent their interests, according to Matthew Soerens, U.S. director of church mobilization for World Relief.

His hope is that the United States goes back to welcoming a historically normal number of refugees. His fear, however, is that even if the administration decided tomorrow to reverse the course it has taken over the past year, it would not be able to. “We’ve had to reduce our infrastructure so significantly,” he said. “I don’t know how long it will take to undo the damage that has been done.” —Religion News Service

A version of this article, which was edited on February 26, appears in the print edition under the title “Groups resettling refugees fight for survival.”