

Faith-based refugee aid groups struggle to stay open

Over the past two years, the nation's refugee resettlement system has been slowly dismantled.

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

Every morning when Khadra Abdo wakes up, her mind turns to her children.

“My first thought is that I hope they are safe today, and that stays on my mind throughout the whole day,” Abdo, 40, said through an interpreter provided by Church World Service, which resettles refugees.

She was separated from her five oldest children 12 years ago when she and her husband fled civil war twice—first in Somalia, then in Libya. When they arrived in Columbus, Ohio, in 2012, her four teenage daughters and one son were living with

her 75-year-old mother in Ethiopia. She filed a request for them to join her through World Relief.

Seven years later, she is still waiting. The World Relief office that once helped her closed in 2017, a “direct result” of President Trump’s executive order to cut the number of refugees resettled that year in the United States, World Relief said.

Abdo has pursued her case through Community Refugee and Immigration Services, Church World Service’s refugee and immigration office, while working at a daycare and studying for her U.S. citizenship exam. But, she said, “it is very hard and very difficult for a mother to be separated from her kids every day.”

Over the past two years, the nation’s refugee resettlement system has been slowly dismantled. The process started after President Trump temporarily suspended the entire refugee program in the United States and issued the first version of a ban on travel from predominantly Muslim countries. That dismantling has led to layoffs and office closings for resettlement groups. The nine agencies authorized by the federal government to resettle refugees in the United States—six of which are faith-based—also saw reduced funding for fiscal year 2018.

Cuts to the refugee resettlement program will have lasting consequences, said Jen Smyers, director of policy and advocacy for the immigration and refugee program with Church World Service.

“You’re not just changing policy for a couple of years; you’re dismantling decades of work and relationships that will be nearly impossible to rebuild,” she said.

Refugees get mixed signals from Americans, Smyers said. When they arrive at the airport, they are often met by the friendly faces of volunteers. But they then see and hear antirefugee sentiment on the news. Refugees ask if they are safe, if they are welcome. They ask if they can share their stories without being deported. And they ask if they will have to flee again and seek refuge in another country.

“It shows the level of anxiety that people have about not being welcome where they finally thought they found a place where they could be safe,” Smyers said.

She worries about the policies that have limited the numbers of refugees allowed to resettle in the United States. And she worries about the rhetoric behind those policies, which paints refugees and immigrants as a threat.

The rhetoric has also vilified the refugee resettlement groups themselves. The man charged with the mass shooting at the Tree of Life–Or L'Simcha synagogue in Pittsburgh had railed on social media against HIAS, a Jewish refugee resettlement agency.

Melanie Nezer, senior vice president of public affairs at HIAS, said the group was shaken but also bolstered by supporters.

“We were reeling from that tragedy, and still are in many ways,” she said. “Our commitment remains the same, or maybe even stronger, knowing that we have the support of our community and other faith communities that really believe in what we’re doing.”

Still, HIAS and other groups face an uncertain future. In addition to widespread layoffs and staff reductions in the wake of lowered refugee admissions, they also consolidated programs after the U.S. State Department informed them it would no longer authorize funding for smaller offices—those expected to handle fewer than 100 refugees in fiscal 2018.

“Consistent with the FY 2019 refugee admissions ceiling, we worked closely with refugee resettlement agencies to align the program with expected arrivals while ensuring appropriate services are available for arriving refugees,” a State Department representative who asked not to be named wrote in an email. “We will continue to base decisions on the location of resettlement affiliates on prioritizing family reunification to the extent practical and consideration of the local resettlement environment and economy.”

The White House did not respond to a request for comment.

Bill Canny, executive director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Migration and Refugee Services, which typically runs its programs through existing Catholic Charities chapters, said their program in Dallas, once robust, has been “the hardest hit.”

Emily Gray, senior vice president of U.S. ministries at World Relief, said that since the start of fiscal year 2017, the country has lost one-third of its capacity to welcome and resettle refugees in local communities.

“The situation is still pretty dire,” Gray said. “The downward pressure is still pretty extreme.”

During Trump’s first year in office, he set 45,000 as the number of refugees allowed into the United States; 22,491 people were admitted. This fiscal year the cap is at 30,000 people—the lowest since the refugee resettlement program started in the 1980s.

“There’s nothing about this these last two years that looks like anything else that I’ve experienced with the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program,” said Kay Bellor, vice president of programs for Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service.

In February LIRS welcomed its first Syrian refugees since the ban went into place.

LIRS also recently welcomed a new president and CEO, Krish O’Mara Vignarajah, who came to the United States as an infant fleeing civil war in Sri Lanka. Congregations and schools in Baltimore helped her family resettle.

Michael Rinehart, chair of the organization’s board, called Vignarajah a “once-in-a-generation leader.”

Vignarajah, a 2017 candidate for governor of Maryland, was policy director for former first lady Michelle Obama and a senior adviser at the U.S. State Department under Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, working with religious communities and on refugee and migration programs.

Vignarajah is Hindu, married to a Catholic, and raising their daughter as both. Being in an interfaith family has taught her that “there is so much more that we share than those differences that divide us.” —Religion News Service

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Two years after travel ban, faith-based refugee groups struggle to stay open.”