

Refugee advocates rally outside White House amid furloughs, frozen funds

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Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., speaks during a protest against the shuttering of the United States Refugee Admissions Program, February 4, in Washington. (RNS photo/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

Over the sounds of construction machinery dismantling inauguration-related viewing stands and other structures in front of the White House, faith-based advocates for refugees worked to make their voices heard Tuesday in Lafayette Square.

“ Gracious God, we gather on this day so that we might bear witness to your love for all people,” prayed Bishop William Gohl Jr., of the Delaware-Maryland Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “and that you would help us to be the moral conscience and voice of this nation again, reminding each one of us that we are immigrants who have found our way to this place.”

The crowd of about 100 was protesting President Donald Trump’s suspension of the US Refugee Admissions Program, which vets refugees for entry into the United States and works with refugee resettlement agencies, the majority of them faith-based, to support those refugees for the first 90 days.

Some who had protested on behalf of refugees at the beginning of Trump’s first term said they were experiencing a sense of déjà vu. “I’m encouraged, while at the same time discouraged, to see that some of our signs have returned,” Sharon Stanley-Rea, director of the Washington office of [Church World Service](#), an organization that resettles refugees, responds to disasters and works on poverty and hunger issues, said at the protest. Held aloft were signs quoting the Gospel of Matthew and the Hebrew Prophet Isaiah; others said “Cold Heart, Frozen Funds,” and “Stop Hate, Love Refugees.”

Stanley-Rea told the assembly that more than two-thirds of Church World Service’s national staff had been furloughed, including 100 percent of the Washington office staff.

“ Yesterday, because of the furloughs, (caseworkers) had to cancel appointments to help children enroll in school, postpone opportunities to assist with legal services, halt connecting a child with urgently needed mental health services, delay chances to help someone get a Social Security card and not help someone apply for benefits who has been a victim of human trafficking,”

Stanley-Rea said, her voice breaking at times.

Izhar, a furloughed Church World Service staffer who declined to share his last name in order to protect family outside the US, said he came from Afghanistan to the US seeking asylum because his work with US Army contractors made him a target of the Taliban.

While he’s been unable to bring his family to join him, Izhar has worked with Afghan, Ethiopian, Cuban and Asian refugees. “ I was very happy when I started working with

the refugees, because I've gone through all the things they need, all the support they need morally," he said.

He remains concerned about Afghan refugees who are stuck in Pakistan, where, he hears, they are facing kidnappings, targeted killings, and harassment by police. Citing an Afghan [found dead](#) by suicide who reportedly felt deep despair about delays in resettlement in Canada, Izhar said those waiting to get into the US often face devastating effects of delays.

Other advocates spoke out against the Trump administration and allies' targeting of faith-based immigration work.

"For goodness' sake, enough with the slander, the insults, the lies directed toward faith communities and others that are welcoming refugees and helping those in need," said John Slocum, executive director of Refugee Council USA, which organized the vigil with Interfaith Immigration Coalition and Northern Virginia Friends of Refugees.

Over the past few days, Elon Musk, the billionaire leading the Department of Government Efficiency and owner of X, has accused faith-based aid groups, including Church World Service and various Lutheran aid organizations, of criminality. Last weekend, Vice President JD Vance falsely characterized the US Conference of Catholic Bishops' resettlement of refugees as helping "illegal immigrants," while questioning whether they were motivated by their "bottom line."

Danilo Zak, director of policy at Church World Service, said that the attacks are "part of the misinformation that's being spread about what refugee resettlement agencies do and what these federal funds are for. And I think it's really important to understand that we're providing these funds directly to refugees and individuals in need."

Although the US Refugee Admissions Program has received bipartisan support in the past, Republicans have not publicly protested Trump's shuttering of the program or his allies' denigration of faith-based aid. US Rep. Jamie Raskin, a Maryland Democrat, was greeted at Tuesday's rally by shouts like "I'm so proud you're my congressman" as he took the bullhorn and called Trump's decision "to slam the door shut on refugees" a "betrayal of America and our values."

“Nobody slammed the door shut in the face of the Trump family from Germany. Nobody slammed the door shut in the face of Melania Trump, who got an O-1 and EB-1 visa for extraordinary ability,” Raskin said. “Nobody slammed the door on Elon Musk, who came from racist, apartheid South Africa, who came here on an F1 student visa,” he continued, [referring to](#) a *Washington Post* report that Musk had worked illegally in the US at the beginning of his career.

Jenifer Smyers, who worked in the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Biden administration, told the attendees, “We rebuilt (the refugee program), and we can rebuild it again.” She continued: “It’s our humanitarian imperative. This country is better, it is stronger when our policies reflect our values.”

After the rally, Smyers said in an interview that dismantling the program was bad strategy.

“When we’re talking about foreign policy, when we’re talking about national security, when we’re talking about diplomacy, a lot of that is deeply influenced by what happens to people who are displaced, because displacement causes instability.”

Jessi Calzado-Esponda, a Cuban American refugee, spoke about her love for the US and the opportunities she had been afforded in this country after leaving her family behind in Cuba.

“When people looked at me, they didn’t look at an invader, they looked at a child,” she said. “I think that we have to bring that back.”

“There’s nothing more American than welcoming refugees,” Calzado-Esponda said.

Anne Derse, a deacon at St. John’s Norwood Episcopal Church in Chevy Chase, Maryland, left the crowd with a mission: “ In addition to calling all of your representatives every single day and demanding that we resume the funding that they have unjustly cut off, please see if you can help a (refugee) family.” —Religion News Service