News



Immigrant families are released from detention July 27 at a bus depot in McAllen, Texas. (CNS photo/Loren Elliott, Reuters)



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"Enlarge the Resettlement Lifeboat and Fill Every Seat" — the title of an Aug. 21 Justice for Immigrants campaign webinar on the upcoming "presidential determination" of next year's refugee admissions — was a call to action based on the image of the United States' resettlement program as a lifeboat rescuing refugees from persecution.

In the last year, that "lifeboat" shrank. In his presidential determination for fiscal year 2018, President Donald Trump set the maximum number of refugees allowed to enter at an historic low of 45,000, despite the fact that United Nations' Refugee Agency (UNHCR) says the world is facing its worst crisis of displaced people in recorded history.

As "travel ban" executive orders and other policy decisions have barred nationals of certain countries, slowed vetting and diverted resources from processing refugees, the U.S. is also on track to fill less than half of even the reduced number of lifeboat seats.

Amid reports that this trend could continue, with a possible presidential determination of 15,000-25,000 for fiscal year 2019 when the decision is due Sept. 30, Catholic groups are combatting misinformation about refugees and advocating to members of Congress and administration officials in an effort to convince Trump to raise the cap.

A refugee ceiling of 15,000 during an unprecedented refugee crisis "would be so low it's laughable," said Donald Kerwin, executive director of Center for Migration Studies of New York, an educational institute connected with the Scalabrini International Migration Network.

During past refugee crises, "the United States' response was central to the global response and to resolving the situations of these massive levels of refugees and it's not playing that role right now," Kerwin added, calling reduced support for refugees "totally antithetical to our own history and our own values."

Before Trump made his first presidential determination, admission caps had ranged from 67,000 to 231,700 since the modern U.S. refugee resettlement program began in 1980. Actual admissions were usually close to the caps with a few exceptions, most notably in the years following the 9/11 attacks. For the past two decades, presidents have set the cap between 70,000 and 91,000.

Although the decision of how many refugees to admit is up to the president, the administration is required to consult with members of the House and Senate judiciary committees. Congress authorizes funding for the program.

Bill Canny, executive director of the U.S. bishops' conference's Migration and Refugee Services and Joan Rosenhauer, executive director of Jesuit Refugee Service/USA, both said their organizations have been engaging with Congress and administration officials in an effort to influence the decision.

The Justice for Immigrants webinar called on participants to visit or write their representatives in Congress, or sign a letter from Catholic leaders calling for a higher presidential determination.

While the Center for Migration Studies doesn't engage in direct advocacy, Kerwin pointed out that a report he authored and released in August, "The US Refugee Resettlement Program — A Return to First Principles: How Refugees Help to Define, Strengthen, and Revitalize the United States," can dispel some unfounded concerns about refugees' effects on the U.S.

Although refugees require an initial investment — they receive cash assistance and case management for eight months, and use Medicaid and nutrition assistance at a higher rate than other U.S. residents — the report found that over time their levels of integration and contributions increase.

Refugees have higher rates of labor force participation and employment than the U.S. population in general. Those who have spent more years in the country, arriving between 1987 and 1996, actually exceed the U.S. population in median personal income, homeownership and health insurance.

"They're really trying to work hard to make their lives here because they don't have anywhere else to go. They want to be here and they know what the alternatives would be," Kerwin said.

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Refugees' success is good for all Americans, Rosenhauer emphasized, explaining research shows that "refugees are helping to revitalize some of the small towns,

moving in and taking jobs and helping to keep those towns alive" and that refugees start businesses at high rates, contributing to the economy and creating jobs.

Rosenhauer also challenged concerns that refugees are a security risk. In reality, she said, refugees are intensely vetted by the U.N. and various U.S. government agencies in a process that takes at least two years.

Advocates also emphasized the extreme need for refugee resettlement, focusing on both individuals' need to flee dire situations and the general refugee crisis.

"These are not people who have left their countries by choice but have left because they are persecuted for a variety of reasons," said Canny. "These are not opportunists looking for a better life; their lives have been destroyed."

Refugees might be fleeing various kinds of violence and persecution, as well as starvation, droughts or other natural disasters, said Rosenhauer.

UNHCR lists the global refugee population at 25.4 million, with another 40 million internally displaced and an additional 3.1 million asylum seekers.

Most refugees are able to return to their home countries after conditions improve, or permanently settle in the countries that first receive them when they flee — places like Uganda, Pakistan, Turkey and Lebanon, that are close to nations in crisis.

Lebanon in particular hosts about 1 million refugees, mostly Syrians. That number is equivalent to a quarter of Lebanon's population, and would be comparable to the U.S. accepting 80 million refugees over a period of seven or eight years, said Rosenhauer.

Advocates aren't asking that the U.S. do anything of the sort; most are requesting that the presidential determination be set at 75,000, a number below what has been requested in the past that now seems optimistic, she said.

It's important to emphasize how small the number of resettled refugees is compared to global need and the size of the U.S., said Canny. "It's a very small, regulated, controlled program that gives a small subset of the refugee population an opportunity for a new life."

UNHCR predicts 1.4 million refugees will be in need of resettlement in a third country during 2019. To be eligible for resettlement in the U.S., refugees must be at

serious risk of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.

Because refugees who would be eligible for resettlement if the U.S. offered space are those in the direst situations, cutting refugee numbers can have serious consequences for people's lives.

After going through a long process of extensive screening to be approved for resettlement, not being able to resettle is an "incredible crushing disappointment," said Kerwin. "But also their prospects are what they were before and they wouldn't have gotten chosen for resettlement … if they hadn't been in extraordinarily difficult circumstances."

Sometimes refugees "take their chances" in an effort to escape those difficult conditions, Rosenhauer said, attempting to cross the Mediterranean or moving around Europe. "They're trying to find a way to have a decent life for their families and if the formal systems aren't working then they try informal systems, and often at the cost of their lives."

Refugees "are some of the most impressive people I've ever met," Rosenhauer added. "They are incredibly resilient. They have survived traumas that we can't even imagine and continued to try to build a positive life for their families. … They build community. They support each other. They deserve our support."

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