News



In this April 17, 2019, file photo, Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee takes part in a discussion on state-level criminal justice reform in Nashville, Tenn. Republican Gov. Bill Lee says Tennessee won't stop resettling refugees under an option offered to states by President Donald Trump's administration. (AP/Mark Humphrey, File)

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Tennessee won't stop resettling refugees, Republican Gov. Bill Lee said December 18, rejecting the option offered to states by President Donald Trump's administration.

The issue forced Lee, who campaigned on his Christian beliefs, to consider his own experience helping refugees and weigh it against the will of fellow Republicans in the Legislature. GOP lawmakers had sued the federal government over its refugee resettlement program and legislative leaders hoped Lee would accept Trump's offer.

“The United States and Tennessee have always been ... a shining beacon of freedom and opportunity for the persecuted and oppressed, particularly those suffering religious persecution,” Lee said in a statement. “My administration has worked extensively to determine the best outcome for Tennessee, and I will consent to working with President Trump and his administration to responsibly resettle refugees.”

In Lee's conservative state, his pro-refugee decision was viewed as far from a sure thing. He wrote that his decision is initially valid for a year. So far, no states have said they plan to reject refugees.

In September, Trump slashed the number of refugees allowed into the U.S. and authorized state and local governments to refuse to accept them. An executive order says that if a state or a locality has not consented to receive refugees under the State Department's Reception and Placement Program, then refugees should not be resettled within the state or locality unless the secretary of state decides otherwise.

Some resettlement groups have sued to block Trump's order.

Tennessee stopped participating in the refugee program in 2008.

Catholic Charities of Tennessee administers a program under a law that says if a state withdraws, the federal government can pick a nonprofit to administer federal money for cash and medical assistance and social services to eligible refugees.

Even if a state opts out under Trump's order, refugees could still move there — but they wouldn't get funding for medical assistance and screenings, employment, social

adjustment services and English language training.

More than 2,000 refugees resettled in Tennessee during the 2016 budget year. That number dropped to 478 in 2018 under Trump and has hit 692 in 2019.

The Tennessee Legislature's fight against the refugee program was sparked in part by fears of refugees following terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, California, in 2015.

At the time, former Republican Gov. Bill Haslam urged the federal government to halt the settlement of Syrian refugees in Tennessee unless state agencies could get involved in the vetting process. Haslam later said he didn't think that people who are trying to do the country harm are coming in under a refugee program process that takes between 18 months and three years.

Attorney General Herbert Slatery declined the Republican-led legislature's request to sue the federal government over refugee resettlement, but lawmakers forged ahead with the help of a third-party legal outfit. The lawsuit has been rejected up to the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. It's unclear whether they'll try to get the U.S. Supreme Court to weigh in.

House Speaker Cameron Sexton and Senate Speaker Randy McNally said in a joint statement that they would've preferred to “hit the pause button on accepting additional refugees in our state.”

Lee succeeded Haslam in January after a rough GOP primary in which he and his opponents echoed Trump's tough talk on immigration. He wrote Wednesday that he supports the lawsuit effort, saying it seeks to "bind and require the federal government to consult with the states.”

Lee went to greater lengths than his foes to tout his Christian faith while campaigning. Hundreds of evangelicals appealed to Lee's faith in a letter this month. In a letter Wednesday to McNally and Sexton, Lee said he's visited refugee camps on multiple continents and has helped refugees in Tennessee for years.

"The refugee population in Tennessee is small, and I believe our consent to cooperate and consult with the Trump Administration to provide a safe harbor for those who are fleeing religious persecution and violent conflict is the right decision," Lee wrote.

Holly Johnson, who coordinates the Tennessee Office for Refugees within the Catholic Charities, said employers are "chasing down resettlement agencies because they know refugees work hard, they show up, they'll work overtime, they call when they're out," particularly during Tennessee's time of low unemployment.

Multiple big local governments made it known that they wanted to keep accepting refugees, including Nashville, Knoxville, Chattanooga and Shelby County, which includes Memphis. Trump's order allows local governments to decide on refugee resettlement if the state opts in.

Fartun Abdi, a 25-year-old Somalian refugee, arrived in the U.S. as a child with her mother and two step-siblings. She now works as a refugee case assistant for Catholic Charities. Abdi said she voted for Lee and prayed over his refugee decision.

She said she only found out five years ago that her dad, a fisherman, is still alive after her family separated while fleeing fighting in their country. She still hasn't met him face-to-face. He and several of Abdi's siblings remain in Africa amid Trump's tightened immigration restrictions.

"It definitely hurts. There are certain times it gets to me," Abdi said. "When's there a wedding or when families get together and I see everybody with their fathers, sisters, I sit there all alone."

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