News



A file photo shows Catholic Charities caseworker Vari Haval on the phone, making last minute arrangements for a family of Kurdish refugees who fled Syria for Turkey before arriving in Nasvhille, Tenn. Caseworkers from Catholic Charities of Tennessee were on hand greet the refugees and offered case management services to them as they resettled in the U.S. (OSV News/Tennessee Register/Theresa Laurence)



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Since it was created in 1980, more than 3 million refugees have been welcomed to America through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, known as USRAP.

That changed on Jan. 20 of this year when President Donald Trump signed an executive order titled, "Realigning the United States Refugee Admissions Program."

The order was not, however, just a bureaucratic shuffling of program components; it was a cessation of refugee admissions: "This order suspends the USRAP until such time as the further entry into the United States of refugees aligns with the interests of the United States." Federal refugee assistance funding was also suspended.

It's happened before — starting in 2017, the annual cap on the number of admitted refugees was lowered each year during the first Trump administration, reaching 15,000 in 2021 — the lowest refugee cap in U.S. history.

The impact on Catholic Charities organizations across the country has been devastating — agencies have both laid off employees, and halted their refugee resettlement programs.

"We're still surviving," said Katie Dillon, communications manager at Commonwealth Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Richmond, Virginia.

"At the beginning — back in January, February, March — it was chaotic. We were really struggling, and trying to figure out what we were going to do. At that time, we had been sent by the federal government over 350 refugees. And then all of a

sudden they said, ‘We're not going to pay for it' — for the resettlement," Dillon shared. "So we really struggled at the beginning — just to figure out what we were going to do, and how we were going to do it without the funding."

After the shock wore off, Dillon found assistance.

"With the help of our amazing community here in Virginia — donors, board members, different community groups, faith groups — we were able to keep those 350 people housed, with all of the resources they needed," she said.

Still, owing to the executive order, there are currently no new refugees to serve.

"That part of the program is pretty much gone for us right now," said Dillon. "We did actually have to lay off over 20 staff members across the state. It was heartbreaking. We also had plans to open a new resettlement office, where we would have hired new employees; that had to end."

"But," she added, "we are continuing to serve refugees who are already here. That's what we're doing right now. We are unfortunately not welcoming new refugees right now — but we are continuing to work with those who are here."

Not all refugees, however, have been unwelcome in the U.S. since USRAP was suspended. In May, the Trump administration admitted a small group of white South Africans, stating they were being persecuted because of their race by that country's Black-led government.

Dillon reported that the refugees with whom Commonwealth Catholic Charities continues to work are anxious.

"They are all legally in the United States," she noted. "But they have expressed that they are scared. We will continually say, ‘You're here; you're legal. You're fine. You can go out into the community.' But there is a bit of fear right now."

The halt of USRAP has also fragmented families.

"One of the things that's really special about our program is we often have refugees who work for us, and they really know the situation of the individuals coming in," said Dillon. "We had one staff person whose family had a time to leave; they had everything ready. They'd been waiting for four years. And as of January, it just stopped; they were told they couldn't come. The staff person now has no idea when she'll ever see her family."

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While Catholic Charities USA does not yet have specific figures for how many Catholic Charities refugee programs have ended or how many staff have been laid off, an internet search of headlines nonetheless tells the story: "Trump's funding cuts force Catholic Charities to restrict more than 60 years of service for refugees and immigrants in Nashville," said the Nashville Banner in April. "'It's heartbreaking': Catholic Charities VP says they can no longer resettle refugees in Rochester," WHEC News10 in Rochester, New York, was told in June. "For the first time since 1980, Catholic Charities forced to pause its refugee resettlement program," reported WCPO 9 in Cincinnati, also during June.

Matt Smith — chief development officer of Catholic Charities of Fort Wayne & South Bend, Indiana — had the same unwelcome surprise as Dillon.

"Any federal funding from refugee resettlement, it's over — and we don't know if it will begin again, or what will happen," said Smith. "We're looking at different options, but that was our restructuring — losing some of our folks was in reaction to that. We also receive funding through our state; through Indiana."

The state funding, Smith shared, "is for continued support and integration of the refugees; these are legal refugees to our country. The continued support is to help them integrate into the United States. And so those are the funds we are using to continue our immigration work."

"In our diocese," he added, "we have approximately 1,400 refugees that are still being served under that program."

Smith said the refugees are primarily from Myanmar, Ukraine and Afghanistan.

"There are a lot of families that were looking to be reunified," reflected Smith. "That's the humanitarian part of this; there are obviously some of our clients that are disappointed, but hopeful that something may change. They have relatives who are still in their home countries that they are hoping will eventually be able to come to the United States — but right now, with that program ceased, those reunifications aren't going to happen."

For more than 50 years, Catholic Charities agencies across America — funded by refugee resettlement contracts between the federal government and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops — assisted in the resettlement of newcomers. The USCCB worked with Catholic Charities agencies through its own Migration and Refugee Services division.

But after the Trump administration's January USRAP decision — and its lack of payment for existing contracts — the USCCB decided in April to cease the partnership.

"I think that's not coming back. I don't think that is going to happen anymore," suggested Paul Propson, CEO of Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan. "I think that the harm done by the termination of the contract — which initially was terminated by the federal government — would cause the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to say, 'Is this a trustworthy partner in charitable work?'"

Propson reflected for a moment.

"Another generation of people could come along and say, 'Why don't we do this?' And maybe we will, but," he added, "that was a shock — and I think that shock is going to last for quite some time."

Yet like Dillon and Smith, his agency forges ahead.

"We are always looking for ways to love our neighbors, to serve our neighbors, to meet the needs of our neighbors — and we don't look at where people came from, or what their demographics are. We look at what their need is," said Propson. "So our focus is on who's hungry, who's homeless, who needs a job. And that's who we're helping. We're helping people all over the six counties of the Archdiocese of Detroit. Many are U.S. citizens; likely, many are not — but we don't ask."

There is also fear in Detroit — a reality Propson said has impacted operations.

"We know that people who are uncertain as to whether they might get deported are less likely to seek medical care or food assistance, or even maybe go to school, or go to church, or anything like that," he said. "So we know that is happening. We've heard reports that people just aren't coming — the number of people coming to various programs and events has declined."

However, some Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan programs — for example, parenting and English-language instruction — are accessible online.

"We wish everyone had everything they needed for life," he commented, "but we know people are deprived of things, especially many children; many seniors — many of those individuals are migrants and immigrants. Catholic Charities will always be striving to meet the needs of the least of these brothers and sisters. That's the call that Jesus put on us. And," added Propson, "we will do that."

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.