

ARAB AMERICAN INSTITUTE REFUGEE BACKLASH AND RESETTLEMENT

Background

The United States has a proud tradition of welcoming refugees. Throughout some of the direst humanitarian crises across the globe, the United States has historically opened its doors to the world's most vulnerable populations.

To be admitted to the United States, refugees are required to go through a robust vetting process that includes numerous domestic and international agencies. This multi-layered sequential screening can take up to 24 months, and it is just the first step in the resettlement process. Refugees who make it through vetting are then assigned to be resettled in a designated resettlement city based on a number of factors. One of those factors is the local capacity of resettlement organizations to provide services to the refugees. In Fiscal Year 2015, the United States resettled a total of 69,933 refugees. As of July 31, 2016, the U.S. has admitted 59,099 refugees in 2016.

The Problem

Anti-Refugee Backlash

Following the tragic terrorist attacks in Paris, France and San Bernardino, California, several public officials exploited the climate of fear and uncertainty to introduce legislation that would effectively end the United States' proud tradition of opening our doors to refugees. This includes Governors from a majority of the states who, despite not having legal authority to do so, said their states would decline to participate in the resettlement program.

Despite the robust vetting process for refugees resettling in the U.S., the new legislation implied that the current process is inadequate. One such bill that was H.R.4038, the American Security Against Foreign Enemies (SAFE) Act. According to one of the SAFE Act's sponsor's, Rep. McCaul (R, TX-10), Syrian and Iraqi refugees should be viewed as national security liabilities because, he argued, they could take advantage of the U.S. refugee admissions program, thereby creating a "federally funded jihadi pipeline." This unprecedented and harmful rhetoric conflates a dire humanitarian crisis with a national security concern. Although H.R.4038 successfully passed through the House, it failed to get through the Senate. During congressional consideration of the SAFE Act, the Obama Administration deemed the bill "untenable" because it would effectively halt the admittance of refugees to the the U.S.

H.R.158, the Visa Waiver Program and Terrorist Travel Prevention Act, saw a bit more success. Introduced by Rep. Candice Miller (R, MI-10), the legislation enacted discriminatory changes to the country's Visa Waiver Program (VWP) stating that individuals who are dual-nationals of, or who have recently traveled to, Iraq, Syria, Iran, or Sudan may not travel to the U.S. through VWP. Due to the reciprocal nature of the Visa Waiver Program, these restrictions invite the possibility for partner nations to institute similar restrictions on Americans seeking to travel abroad. This legislation passed the House but was later adopted as part of a must-pass omnibus-spending package approved at the end of 2015. Although President Obama signed the bill into law, the administration implemented new rules that provided exceptions for people who have visited Iran, Iraqi, Syria and Sudan for business, government, humanitarian or journalistic reasons, ultimately undermining the power of H.R.158.

Amidst a climate of fear, stoked in part by some Members of Congress, many of these damaging and illogical bills were written hastily, negotiated in secret, and a voted on without a debate in

Congress.

Local Resettlement Challenges

The legislative challenges seeking to halt, or seriously impede, the resettlement of refugees are only a few of the obstacles facing refugees seeking to come to America. The limited number of refugees who navigate the vetting process are resettled in designated sites based in part on the local capacity of resettlement organizations to assist their transition to the U.S. Many refugees arrive at one of the 190 sites across the country with few resources, English language skills, or immediate employment prospects.

For the first three months after being resettled, refugees are assisted by the Department of State's Reception and Replacement program which provides a one-time sum per refugee to assist with rent, transportation, food, and clothing. Refugees are eligible for housing and Section 8 vouchers through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) even before they receive their Social Security cards, which can be a lengthy process. Refugees might be unaware that they are eligible for these HUD resources that can help with costs of living after the first three months of living in the U.S.

Additionally, the designated resettlement sites and local agencies are often in communities that do not have culturally sensitive services or an established immigrant community that can be helpful to recently arrived refugees. When refugees are resettled in communities that do not have these services or established communities, they sometimes self-relocate to cities that have established support communities in place, but in doing so, often are no longer near resettlement agencies and non governmental organizations that receive federal funding to assist refugees with costs of living and other critical services.

Moving Forward

- Urge the Office of Refugee Resettlement to consider the local community atmosphere where refugees will be placed to ensure that newly arrived refugees have available resources and a welcoming atmosphere.
- Support an increase in Section 8 housing vouchers provided by HUD and implement anti-discrimination laws to ensure that refugees are able to use their vouchers to access safe and affordable housing.
- Members of Congress should support an increase in resources to ensure proper allocation of funds and staff to expedite the refugee vetting process, which can take up to 24 months.
- Congress must pass the bipartisan "Equal Protection in Travel Act of 2016." This legislation, would remove discriminatory provisions placed on dual nationals who might participate in the Visa Waiver Program.