News

Supporters surround a group who perform the Islamic midday prayer outside the White House in Washington, on Jan. 27, 2018, during a rally on the one-year anniversary of the Trump Administration's first partial travel ban on citizens from seven Muslim majority countries. (AP/Andrew Harnik)

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Eight years ago, John Giri, a refugee from Bhutan, came to the U.S. and then turned around to help others settle in this country.

After working for a tortilla company in Atlanta, he landed a job as an interpreter for World Relief, the same evangelical Christian organization that had helped him adapt to life in the U.S. after almost 20 years in a refugee camp in Nepal.

“I came as a refugee — I know the process,” he said, reflecting on six years working with World Relief. “I have been through all the difficulties of life in a refugee camp and know what it is to be a refugee.”

Giri, a Baptist, was eventually promoted to case manager.

But all that came to a screeching halt in March 2017, when Giri and nine of his co-workers were abruptly laid off.

“I was angry — emotionally harmed,” he said, adding that it took months to find another job. But while he acknowledged initial frustration with his employer, he also expressed ire toward another source: the Trump administration.

“My frustration was [also] over the change of policies and change in government,” he said.

Giri is one of hundreds of resettlement workers who have lost their jobs over the past year — many, refugees themselves.

Refugee aid groups have conducted massive layoffs and office closures ever since the Trump administration began issuing various versions of a travel ban, sometimes called a “Muslim ban.” The groups have been left on the hook for empty apartments

and have had to explain to interested churches why they can't bring refugees to their areas. And many refugee advocates have expressed concern over how long it will take the groups to come back from those cuts, if they can at all.

Trump administration officials said in late January they would once again allow refugees from countries included in the bans — which have accounted for more than 40 percent of refugee admissions over the last three years, according to State Department data — so long as the newcomers undergo additional vetting.

President Trump has also slashed the total number of refugees who will be admitted into the U.S., from 110,000 in fiscal 2017 — a bar set by former President Obama — to 45,000 in fiscal 2018, which started in October. And agencies say they aren't even on track to settle that number: Just over 6,000 had come to the country in the last three months.

Hidden behind these figures is the decimation of an expansive refugee resettlement apparatus composed largely of faith-based nonprofit organizations that have partnered with the federal government for decades. Of the nine groups helping refugees find a home in America, six claim a religious affiliation: World Relief, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Church World Service, HIAS (founded as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and Episcopal Migration Ministries.

Historically, these groups are contracted by the government to help take in refugees after they undergo a lengthy application and vetting process that involves several agencies, including the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security. (The placement of families is determined on a weekly basis through consultation between the State Department and the resettlement groups.)

Once people are brought to the U.S., resettlement groups authorized annually by the State Department typically provide new arrivals with housing and food, as well as long-term assistance for achieving self-sufficiency such as help in finding jobs, learning English and often becoming permanent U.S. residents or citizens.

But leaders of these groups say the Trump administration’s new policies are hobbling their operations and hurting those they serve. They're fighting back and finding hope in a groundswell of support from people of faith, but the future remains uncertain.

“I don’t know how long it will take to undo the damage that has been done,” said Matthew Soerens, U.S. director of church mobilization for World Relief.

A program under siege

The harm inflicted on the resettlement program by the Trump administration is difficult to calculate. Each organization is structured differently and many partner with independent local groups for on-the-ground efforts.

Protesters outside White House on Sunday, Jan. 29, 2017, demonstrating against President Trump’s travel and refugee ban. (RNS/Jerome Socolovsky)

Even so, a Reuters report Feb. 14 found that these agencies are preparing to shutter more than 20 offices in the coming year, and the agencies' data highlight a pattern of downsizing in the aftermath of the initial ban.

World Relief, which generally takes in about 10 percent of refugees entering the U.S., announced within weeks of the initial ban that it would lay off more than 140 employees — about one-fifth of its U.S.-based staff — and close five of its local offices.

HIAS reported it is in the process of closing two sites — one in Los Angeles and another in Chicago — and has halted plans to open others.

A Church World Service official said the small band of national-level staff under its purview remains largely intact but predicted all of its partner offices will have to lay off at least one employee in 2018. (An April 2017 Voice of America investigation counted at least 17 layoffs across the organization.)

USCCB officials said they are still deciding how to move forward but already expect to close about 15 sites this year, shifting from 75 to as few as 60. Catholic Charities, the primary affiliate for the USCCB's on-the-ground resettlement work, said that of the 700 full-time employees across its network who work on refugee resettlement, more than 300 are estimated to see a temporary layoff, permanent layoff or possible reassignment due to the refugee ban.

An April 2017 report from the Episcopal News Service said the Episcopal Church would cut its 31-member affiliate network by six in 2018.

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service said it had not closed any sites, though before she resigned earlier this week as its president and CEO,
Linda Hartke confirmed the agency has made staff reductions at its headquarters.

Local organizations appear to bear the brunt of the cuts. Paula Torisk, deputy director of refugee resettlement for Catholic Charities San Antonio, which works with the USCCB's program, said her office has laid off at least 23 people because of the various bans — around 30 percent to 35 percent of her staff.

She said many of those who lost their jobs are, like Giri, themselves refugees or former refugees who have since become U.S. citizens. Her office previously relied on their cultural knowledge and language skills but has been forced to hire translators in their absence.

“You’ve got staff taking on cases where they don’t speak the language,” said Torisk, who has worked with refugees since 1996. “I’ve heard other resettlement programs say, ‘How can we pay for [interpreters] if our funding is cut?’”

She also said that due to uncertainty surrounding the program, funding for the longer-term refugee assistance — such as providing English classes — is now doled out on a quarterly basis instead of annually throughout Texas.

“This has been the most difficult time,” she said. “I’ve always looked at this program like being on a roller coaster ride, but this has been a year like no other.”

From bad to worse

Things are expected to get worse, especially for local offices that work with multiple agencies. In December, the State Department reportedly told refugee groups it will cut the number of offices across the country authorized to resettle refugees in 2018. Offices expected to handle fewer than 100 refugees in fiscal 2018 will no longer be authorized to do so, according to Reuters.

The guidance appears to prohibit nonprofit organizations from working with more than one refugee aid group, but the implications were murky even to some officials.

The State Department, which reportedly sidelined the former head of refugee admissions in January, declined requests for an interview about the new guidance.

Meanwhile, officials say the cost of the ban can sometimes fall disproportionately on the resettlement agencies instead of on the federal government.

Jen Smyers, director of policy and advocacy for the CWS Immigration and Refugee Program, said that after the initial ban came down, several CWS affiliates were suddenly left with empty apartments furnished for refugees who may never arrive. Since the federal government only offers additional funds once a refugee is physically at a site, she said local groups were forced to figure out what to do — sometimes by paying the cost themselves.

Smyers said that for all nine agencies in 2017, there were more than 20,000 cases where refugees did not arrive despite signed agreements with the State Department to resettle them.

“With the more recent bans we have kind of learned this can happen,” she said, adding that now some apartments are only furnished with bare necessities when a refugee arrives.

Bill Canny, executive director of the USCCB’s office of Migration and Refugee Service, recalled one case where his organization stepped in to cover initial costs for an affiliate struggling to pay for an apartment.

And as offices close, issues can compound for people who are already here. One laid-off World Relief worker with permanent resident status — who asked not to be identified due to lack of U.S. citizenship and fear of retribution in America's current political climate — said that when the worker's office closed, it cut off resettled refugees from much-needed services they should have been able to access for years. New arrivals often rely on agency workers to help navigate complicated apartment lease agreements, for instance, as they are typically in a language the refugees do not read or speak.

Now many are forced to fend for themselves, the former caseworker said.

"We're at a moment politically in this country where the Trump administration is only closing the door further on refugees and not creating opportunities for communities like Helena to be a place of hospitality. That’s a hard message for me to carry," Hartke told RNS before stepping down from LIRS, recalling a recent meeting she had with a church in Helena, Mont., interested in taking in refugees.

"It’s a conversation I'd love to see the president have in a church basement someplace like Helena."

Faith communities left in the lurch

Faith communities have been resettling refugees for decades, Hartke said, and the country's mostly faith-based agencies play a huge role in helping them integrate quickly into life in America. They've taken in refugees fleeing Germany during World War II; the Lost Boys of Sudan; refugees from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Bosnia and, more recently, Burma, Iraq and Syria.

They're people local businesses are eager to employ, who have become doctors and lawyers and philanthropists and leaders in their communities, according to the former LIRS leader.

But the starts and stops over the past year have been painful for these communities, which have stepped up to respond to the refugee crisis.

The "disconnect" felt now by the Lutherans and other church members she meets is "not just around a policy," she said.

"It goes to something much more fundamental to the opportunity we as Americans and Christians have to demonstrate God's love to our neighbors, to demonstrate that we use our gifts and talents to protect the most vulnerable. Somehow that narrative that stretches over 2,000 years is somehow not at all a factor in political machinations that seem to try to be appealing to base instincts and fears in some parts of this country."

A hopeful backlash

Staffing cuts notwithstanding, agency officials see signs of hope. Every group RNS spoke with — including at least one that is not faith-based — mentioned a spike in interest after the initial ban.

CWS reported its volunteer base has quadrupled, while donations to World Relief from churches, individuals and nongovernmental sources have nearly doubled over the past two years and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service’s revenue from the private sector increased by more than 105 percent from 2016 to 2017.

Far more people are now aware of the refugee crisis, according to the Rev. E. Mark Stevenson, director of Episcopal Migration Ministries. Staff at the ministry of the Episcopal Church is working overtime to feed "a hunger out there" from people wanting to learn more about refugees — who they are, what they've been through, what they face coming to the U.S. and other countries.

"That to me is the real bright light in this ... that refugees are so much in the news, people are asking, 'What's this all about?'" Stevenson said.

The problem remains, however, as to how to handle the surge in interest. Mark Hetfield, president and CEO of HIAS, said representatives from local partners repeatedly expressed concern during a January retreat over how to accommodate the deluge.

“They have literally hundreds of volunteers lined up with no refugees arriving, or very few,” he said. “It just shows you the great capacity this country has to welcome refugees, and that capacity is going unmet.”

Fighting back

Faith-based resettlement groups are refusing to let their work be dismantled without a fight.

Staff and volunteers have taken part in protests across the country decrying the ban throughout 2017 and into 2018. Representatives from CWS and other groups were among those who flooded airports after the ban was announced and have organized subsequent large-scale demonstrations and vigils in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere.

World Relief took out a full-page ad last February in The Washington Post. The ad included the signatures of 500 prominent evangelicals voicing their support for refugees directly to Trump and Vice President Mike Pence.

HIAS is listed as a plaintiff in at least two suits filed against the ban and submitted an amicus brief and a supplemental declaration alongside the International Refugee Assistance Project in a Hawaii case challenging the Trump administration's second version. HIAS is also a plaintiff in the most recent case against "travel ban 3.0" brought before the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which ruled Thursday that the Trump directive is likely unconstitutional (the ruling is largely symbolic, as the U.S. Supreme Court has allowed the ban to take effect while it is brought before the justices).

Other organizations, such as Church World Service, also signed on to amicus briefs ahead of the initial Supreme Court ruling last year, as did 39 faith groups in total.

Unclear path forward

Even with such efforts, the path forward for the resettlement agencies remains unclear. The Trump administration gives little indication it plans to abandon its hawkish stance on refugees.

World Relief has “felt a sense of confusion at least” from the people in the evangelical Christian churches it works with over that stance from a president who claims to represent their interests, according to Soerens.

His hope is that the U.S. goes back to welcoming a historically normal number of refugees and being "a country that is proud of our national identity as a beacon of safety and refuge for those fleeing persecution around the world," he said.

His fear, however, is even if the administration decided tomorrow to reverse the course it's taken over the past year, it wouldn't be able to "because we've had to reduce our infrastructure so significantly."

In the meantime, many leaders insist they will figure out a way to handle whatever comes their way, and they appear to be ramping up their calls for change by partnering with an expanding list of allies.

This was clear during a protest outside the White House on Jan. 27 to mark the one-year anniversary of the initial ban. The interfaith gathering was sponsored in part by CWS, HIAS and LIRS; several demonstrators waved signs emblazoned with their logos as speakers — including many faith leaders — praised refugees and decried the Trump administration's policies.

After joining hands with Hetfield from HIAS in solidarity, CWS Interfaith Advocacy Minister the Rev. Reuben Eckels bellowed, "This is a battle for our souls, right here!"