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Families evacuated from Kabul, Afghanistan, sit in a bus after they arrived at Washington Dulles International Airport, in Chantilly, Va., Aug. 31, 2021. Commonwealth Catholic Charities in Virginia is among local Catholic Charities agencies that have challenged the federal government's abrupt suspension of the refugee resettlement program on Jan. 24, 2025. (AP/Gemunu Amarasinghe)



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March 25, 2025

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"A new reality" is how Anita Hassell describes it.

Catholic Charities in the St. Augustine Diocese in Florida has been operating in a difficult environment since Jan. 24, when the Trump administration froze all federal spending on foreign aid and refugee resettlement.

"Basically, this really happened overnight, as soon as the executive order was issued," said Hassell, the CEO and diocesan director of Catholic Charities Bureau for the St. Augustine Diocese.

With the government not paying the \$1.2 million that her agency is still owed for refugee resettlement expenses, Hassell said she had "no choice" but to lay off 26 employees in February. And with the U.S. State Department [notifying the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on Feb. 26](#) that it was canceling its contracts to resettle refugees, Hassell said she has since had to lay off the remaining 10 employees in the agency's refugee resettlement program.

"As of the end of March, we're completely closing the program down," Hassell said.

Catholic Charities agencies across the country in recent weeks have taken similar measures. Due to the frozen federal funding, at least a dozen agencies from Florida to California since late January have laid off hundreds of employees. Some have begun to wind down their refugee resettlement programs even as they still try to provide services for those who need assistance paying for rent and groceries.

"The abrupt termination of some government contracts and ongoing speculation about the status of other government funding has created a broad sense of uncertainty among faith-based social services providers," said Kevin Brennan, vice president for media relations and executive communications at Catholic Charities USA.

"What remains certain is that Catholic Charities agencies across the country will continue to offer merciful, life-changing support to the most vulnerable members of their local communities — as they have for more than a century," Brennan told NCR

in an email.

Jason Brown, the CEO of Commonwealth Catholic Charities in Virginia, wrote in a legal declaration filed Feb. 24, "CCC has never before faced the agonizing situation of denying help to refugees already admitted to our program." The declaration was filed in support of [the U.S. bishops' lawsuit](#) challenging the federal government's abrupt suspension of the refugee resettlement program.

The dilemmas facing Catholic Charities across the country are compounded by other factors.

In late January, the Trump administration attempted to freeze federal aid to nonprofit organizations, prompting Catholic Charities USA President and CEO Kerry Alys Robinson to [issue a statement](#) where she urged the administration to "rethink this decision." Catholic Charities USA said in its statement that it was awaiting "further clarification on spending rules" from the federal government.

On Jan. 29, a federal judge [temporarily blocked the freeze](#) on federal grants and loans.



A volunteer delivers meals for migrants seeking asylum who are waiting at a Catholic Charities center for humanitarian assistance and relief in McAllen, Texas, Jan. 18, 2025. In the same state, Catholic Charities in Galveston-Houston and Fort Worth have made legal filings against the Trump administration's freeze on aid for refugee resettlement. (AP/Eric Gay)

In recent years, right-wing activists and some Republican lawmakers, displeased with Catholic Charities' work on behalf of migrants, have also accused the agency of enabling human smuggling and facilitating an "invasion of our country," as Georgia Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene [said on X](#). Also [writing on X](#), Tennessee Republican Rep. Tim Burchett posted on Jan. 27: "We need to defund Catholic Charities."

Hassell said several of her agency's programs in Florida are funded through the federal government. If a funding freeze on federal grants and loans ever takes effect, she said, it would have dire consequences.

"If that happens, I don't know if we're still going to stay on the map," she said.

In court filings, press releases, and interviews with local media outlets and National Catholic Reporter, the heads of Catholic Charities agencies have explained the devastating impacts and uncertainty they are facing.

"All this has brought some other hardships," said Hassell, who added that her agency is locked in a cost-prohibitive lease for a warehouse it no longer needs. Meanwhile, she said, nearly 500 refugees are at risk of becoming homeless.

"We have been approaching private donors and private foundations to help [refugees] come up with the money for rent, and to help them find employment," Hassell said.

Michael Melara, CEO of Catholic Charities for the Diocese of Syracuse, New York, told NCR that his agency laid off 11 refugee program staff members, furloughed another 40 employees and cut administrative positions because of the federal government's freeze on refugee resettlement spending. Meanwhile, the agency is still trying to assist 376 refugees.

"It's a math problem that has a very real human tragedy to it," Melara said. "If we can't figure out a way to get reimbursed, and we haven't been able to figure that out, then we have to cut expenses. For us, it's a day-to-day evaluation around how we can provide services to so many folks who are in great need."

In Virginia, Commonwealth Catholic Charities' overall charitable mission has been compromised, and "adverse effects" have spilled over into its other charitable projects, Brown [wrote in his court filing](#).

He added that the agency is at risk of defaulting on two of its office leases for lack of cash, and that the agency had to cancel the opening of a planned fourth office.

"Absent immediate relief, we will lose facilities and resources — essential to our overall mission — that will take us years to rebuild, forcing us to operate at a highly diminished capacity in the interim," Brown wrote.

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Commonwealth Catholic Charities laid off 26 employees, about 20% of its workforce, according to the court filing. The agency has discussed closing its refugee resettlement office in eastern Virginia, Brown said, as it lacks the resources to sustain a serious refugee resettlement program.

"If government funding can disappear on a dime, it does not make sense for us to keep this program running," Brown wrote.

Litz Main, the executive director of Catholic Charities of Central and Northern Missouri, wrote in a [Feb. 24 court filing](#) that the agency had laid off half of its refugee resettlement staff since Feb. 1.

"We cannot risk the more stable programs that we can continue to administer independent of government assistance to keep the refugee resettlement program running during a period of government recalcitrance," Main wrote.

In a March 19 statement, Catholic Charities of Central and Northern Missouri said it had begun the process of closing its refugee resettlement program, which is set to end on March 31.

As of mid-February, the Missouri agency had 500 refugees in its resettlement program, but the agency had to tell about half of them that it could no longer assist them because of the funding freeze, according to Main's court filing. She also wrote that the episode made it unlikely that her agency would ever again partner with the U.S. bishops' conference for government-sponsored programs.

She said the agency is shifting its focus to "charitable causes that can garner support from local donors."

Catholic Charities of the Galveston-Houston Archdiocese in February laid off 50 temporary employees and 130 full-time employees, causing about \$150,000 in employment separation costs, according to court documents.

"The abrupt and unprecedented suspension of our refugee resettlement program has resulted in steep, unbudgeted costs, causing programmatic disruptions to ripple through every agency program and department," Cynthia Nunes Colbert, president and CEO of Catholic Charities of the Galveston-Houston Archdiocese, wrote in a Feb. 24 court filing.

Colbert also wrote that her agency has canceled office and parking leases, incurring more than \$160,000 in termination costs. With more than \$1.1 million in unreimbursed expenses for refugee resettlement, along with an additional \$2 million in related costs, Colbert said the agency has had to redirect its focus to other programs that benefit low-income people more generally, such as food pantries, counseling, emergency assistance and life skills classes.

"We refuse to abandon the refugees assigned to our care," Colbert wrote, "but our ability to serve these refugees is already severely curtailed and will continue to decrease as time goes on."

Also in Texas, Catholic Charities Fort Worth filed a federal lawsuit against the Trump administration. In [its March 3 filing](#), the agency demanded that the federal government release \$36 million in funding for refugee resettlement that has been frozen since January.

The lack of payments, the agency wrote, had led to 24 of its 29 partner agencies experiencing staff layoffs or furloughs, and more than 100,000 individuals and families "losing access to critical services." The lawsuit is still pending in federal court.

This story has been updated to add comments from Kevin Brennan of Catholic Charities USA and from Michael Melara of Catholic Charities in Syracuse, New York.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. [View the full series.](#)