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With funding at risk, Church World Service 'on pins and needles' about future of refugee program



SAM JANESCH | Staff Writer Sep 16, 2018



Nearly two years after he and his family became some of the last Syrians to arrive in Lancaster as refugees, Ahmad Mohamed Zein is grateful.

His neighbors, he said, have welcomed them with open arms. His children, two of whom have disabilities, are in school with their health care costs covered. College degrees and citizenship — which he hopes are part of their futures — would be an “honor.”

But for Zein, life in America is also a gift with considerable heartache.

Four of his eight children never made it to America even though they all went through the two-year vetting process together after fleeing to Turkey in 2012 when planes began dropping bombs and killing civilians in their hometown of Aleppo.

The civil war forced out millions of others, leaving 3.5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey and helping to push the number of people displaced across the globe to a historic record of 68.5 million, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency.

Meanwhile, the United States has scaled back its refugee admissions to its lowest point since 1980, and Church World Service — the organization that helped Zein and hundreds of others start new lives in Lancaster in recent years — is now at risk of losing its resettlement program completely.

“If there are going to be fewer refugees, which there are ... there’s a need for fewer offices,” said Sheila Mastropietro, director of the CWS Lancaster office on East King Street.

The Trump administration has indicated it will fund fewer resettlement agencies next year, and Mastropietro, who already **laid off three people this year** and almost had to lay off more from what is now a 23-person staff, said she doesn’t know if her office will be among them.

“The U.S. has always been the model for the rest of the world in reaching out for the most vulnerable,” said Mastropietro. “And that has changed.”



Syrian refugee Ahmad Mohamed Zein is interviewed by LNP on September 6, 2018.

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Refugee numbers down

As President Donald Trump took office in January 2017, the 30th year of Church World Service resettling refugees in the county, Lancaster city was deemed “America’s [refugee capital](#)” by BBC News for resettling 20 times the number of refugees per capita than the country as a whole.

The distinction led to a [visit](#) from Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai, who went on to [promote](#) Lancaster’s efforts on a national stage.

Now, in the 20 months since Trump’s travel ban, Church World Service has resettled about half as many [refugees here](#) as it did in the previous 20 months, according to data provided by CWS.

The Lancaster organization has so far resettled 147 refugees in the fiscal year that ends Sept. 30 and that number is expected to reach 160 with the arrival of two more families by the end of the month. The previous fiscal year, in 2016-17, it was 279 — and the year before that (President Barack Obama’s last full year) it was 407.



TOGETHER

Bridge's monthly meals build bonds with Lancaster County's refugees. Lately every meal has sold out.

ERIN NEGLEY | Staff Writer

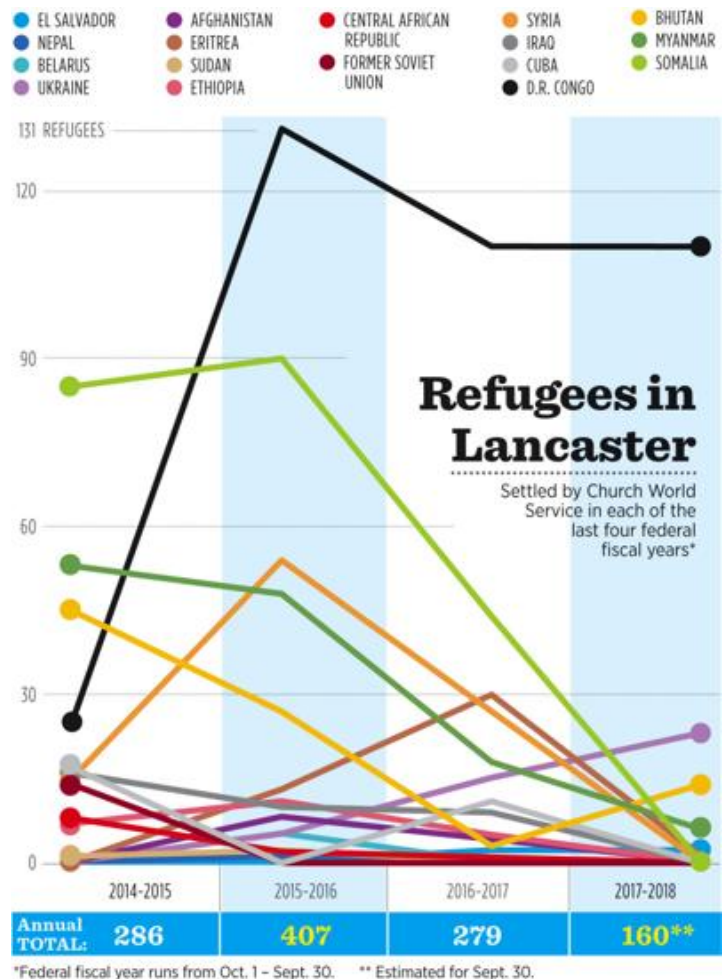
Nationally, refugee admissions have dropped from 84,994 two years ago to 20,825 with two weeks left in this fiscal year, according to the Refugee Processing Center operated under the U.S. Department of State. Pennsylvania has resettled 803 refugees this year.

With Trump’s policy of banning refugees from several Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, the nationalities of those coming to Lancaster County has also changed.

Congolese made up the largest number of those resettled locally this year, at 101. Others included 23 Ukrainians and a smaller number of Bhutanese, Burmese, Salvadorians and Eritreans.

In the roughly two-year period before Trump’s changed policy, nearly 220 Somalis and almost 100 Syrians came to Lancaster. No Syrians have arrived since then, and the last Somali family came in July 2017.

The president said it was a national security issue, and that, out of fears of terrorism, admitting Syrian refugees specifically was “detrimental to the interests of the United States.”



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Zein, the 55-year-old Syrian father who arrived in Lancaster one month before Trump's inauguration, said he did not understand the justification. He said he's never heard of any Syrian committing an act of terror in the United States and hopes the country will once again open its doors.

"Out of mercy, out of compassion, if someone comes to you and they are fleeing for their lives, they are fleeing violence, wouldn't you protect them?" he said through an interpreter. "Wouldn't you provide them with a shelter?"

Funding at risk

Church World Service, headquartered in New York City, is one of nine national organizations funded by the Department of State for refugee resettlement. Each of them is a large operation with multiple local offices spread throughout the country.

But with fewer refugees making it to America's doorstep, the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration "expects to fund a smaller number of recipient agencies" in the next fiscal year, according to a notice provided by a State Department spokesperson.

How many fewer agencies — and what factors might lead to the decision — is unclear. Mastropietro said the CWS national office is being kept in the dark. They just found out this week that the fiscal year will be extended to Dec. 31, delaying the decision of who will be funded and leaving CWS "on pins and needles for an additional three months," she said.



The Church World Services Building at 308 East King Street.

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While stripping refugee resettlement funding may be a fatal blow for some of the nine agencies, Mastropietro said CWS in Lancaster will carry on even if resettlement — its largest program — goes away.

With other public and private funding avenues, CWS would continue operating programs such as legal immigration counseling, employment services and advocacy. And if it does lose the resettlement money, Mastropietro is convinced it will be a temporary, if difficult, setback.

“We’re just going to wait it out,” she said. “If anything happens, we’ll wait it out until the next president.”

For every individual they resettle, CWS receives \$2,125 — \$1,125 of which goes to the family directly for rent, utilities, clothes or any other essentials in the first 90 days, and the other \$1,000 is to cover CWS’ overhead expenses.

So with refugee numbers dropping by 119 this year and by 247 compared to two years ago, Mastropietro has already had to make some tough decisions.

She was forced to **lay off three staff members** in the refugee program last spring and thought she might have to lay off more until two left for other jobs or to go back to school.

Four others remain, and Mastropietro has been actively trying to figure out ways to absorb them into the organization. She's even leaving open a new, unfilled position until October in case she has to move one of her caseworkers who suddenly doesn't have any new cases to work.

The position, funded by money raised privately by the group's Washington, D.C., office, is the first of its kind for the organization — a grassroots refugee organizer. The person holding the position will work with refugees living in the county to get them engaged in their new civic duties, from volunteering to voting.

Bethany Christian Services of Central Pennsylvania, another organization that resettles a smaller number of refugees in Lancaster annually, has also been forced to make cuts this year. Four people who worked to resettle refugees were laid off, with four others remaining as of May.

The group resettled 74 refugees last year and had resettled 44 in the current year through April. Bethany did not respond to a request for updated figures or to questions about further funding concerns.



FAITH + VALUES

Local refugee resettlement agencies lay off 9 as fewer asylum-seekers arrive

EARLE CORNELIUS | Staff Writer

Legislative response

Lawmakers' stances on the refugee and immigrant issues have largely fallen along partisan lines.

Republican U.S. Rep. Lloyd Smucker, who represents most of Lancaster County, "really was a friend to refugees and immigrants" during his two terms in the state Senate from 2008-16, said Mastropietro.

He checked in with CWS regularly and introduced the Pennsylvania Dream Act, which would have allowed undocumented children to receive in-state tuition at Pennsylvania colleges.

But as a freshman congressman, Smucker has routinely voiced support for the president's policies on refugee admissions.

When Smucker last sat down with CWS in April, Mastropietro said, he "seemed very concerned about, and unaware, that refugee numbers were falling, and then didn't understand the worries we had about the program being dismantled."

The "one ask" they had of him, she said, was that he join the Refugee Caucus, a bipartisan group that supports refugee issues. It was important because even though the president sets the refugee limits, he is supposed to do it in consultation with Congress, said Mastropietro.

Asked why Smucker has not joined the group, his spokesman, Bill Jaffee, said, "There are hundreds of House caucuses, each with varying degrees of engagement and effectiveness, and all with some good intent. At this time, Rep. Smucker has not decided to join the refugee caucus."

As for whether Smucker believes the U.S. should resettle more than 20,000 refugees and increase the 45,000 cap, Jaffee said the administration sets the number and it "fluctuates every single year for a variety of reasons."

He added that Smucker "supports measures to help reduce the number of displaced persons globally" and that



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CWS “does important work helping refugees, both in the community and nationwide.” He believes CWS should continue receiving its current per-capita funding for refugees it resettles, Jaffee said.

Zein, who spent his life in Aleppo working construction and writing for a biweekly newspaper, said Smucker sat down with him for about an hour last year to ask him about his experience as a refugee.

Now, he’s looking ahead and wishing his older children and their families have the chance to join the rest of them in America. He’s optimistic. It’s his goal, he said, to share his story and help his new community.

Plus, Zein said, nothing is permanent in politics.

“Governments will change, the Congress will change. Nothing is set in stone,” he said. “Right now their decisions are not in favor of refugees, but things will eventually change.”



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SAM JANESCH | Staff Writer

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