

Faith-based groups counter fear of refugees

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [December 23, 2015](#) issue

Religious groups pushed back against a wave of opposition toward Syrian refugees and are working to preserve the United States as a haven for them.

“We’re really in emergency mode,” said Jen Smyers, director of policy and advocacy for the Immigration and Refugee Program at Church World Service, one of the nine U.S. nonprofits that work with the federal government to resettle refugees. “We are sending letters and petitions and making phone calls to all the governors as well as to members of Congress right now . . . to make sure they understand just how important the resettlement program is.”

The Refugee Resettlement Program—which relies mostly on faith-based organizations to find homes, jobs, and schools for refugees—came under attack after the attacks by ISIS in Paris on November 13 that killed 129 people.

After ISIS announced that it would target New York and Washington, and when news reports raised the possibility that one of the Paris bombers may have entered Europe amid a group of refugees, American politicians began lashing out against plans to bring more Syrians to America.

Arguing that the federal government can’t assure that terrorists from Iraq and Syria, where ISIS has its capital, won’t gain entry to the United States through the program, American politicians have sought to curb it and, by extension, the work of its religious partners.

In the wake of the carnage in France, more than 30 governors said they would not accept Syrian refugees into their states, although the authority to admit refugees lies with the federal government.

Several Republican presidential candidates—including Ben Carson, Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, and John Kasich—have denounced President Obama’s efforts to resettle more Syrian refugees.

An NBC News/SurveyMonkey online poll showed that 56 percent of Americans wanted to ban these refugees from the United States.

Developments in Congress had the nonprofits particularly worried, including legislation under consideration that would make it extremely difficult for any Syrian or Iraqi refugees to enter the country. The resettlement program in recent years has welcomed between 70,000 and 80,000 people to the United States annually, including about 2,200 from Syria since 2011.

Just weeks before the Paris attacks, refugee organizations had high hopes that those numbers would increase, especially after news photos circulated showing a dead Syrian toddler who drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea with his family.

“What the political backlash has done is build a climate of fear, and for some people it is based in Islamophobia,” said Jennie Rosenn, vice president for community engagement at HIAS, formerly known as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, one of the nine faith-based groups supporting the resettlement program.

Six of the nine nonprofits that work with the program are faith-based. In addition to HIAS and CWS, they are the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, Episcopal Migration Ministries, and World Relief.

In the past week these groups have sent their leaders to Capitol Hill, hoping to derail the House bill and dissuade the Senate from supporting a similar measure. They engaged in advocacy and contacted clergy and lay leaders to encourage sermons and local efforts to counter hostility toward the refugees.

“Let’s remember these refugees themselves are fleeing ISIS,” Linda Hartke, president of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, told a Wisconsin television station after Gov. Scott Walker announced that the state would not help resettle any Syrians.

Terrorists won’t use the resettlement program to gain entry to the United States, she said, because it takes so long and scrutinizes them so carefully—a sentiment repeated by many who work with refugees in this country.

“Refugees go through interagency screenings, biometric checks with fingerprinting, forensic documents testing, medical screenings, in-person interviews with the Department of Homeland Security,” said Smyers of CWS. “This program is locked

and tight.”

But many politicians say they’re less than convinced. They point to FBI director James Comey’s testimony to Congress in October noting flaws in the vetting that have allowed two Iraqi refugees into the United States whose fingerprints had been found on improvised explosive devices.

Church leaders are trying to counter this “can’t be too careful” approach.

“Be not afraid,” said Episcopal Church presiding bishop Michael Curry in a statement. “We will not let the nightmare this world often is keep us from carrying out the words of Jesus who told us to be a neighbor to those in need.”

The National Council of Churches released a statement saying that while terrorism is a threat, it claims fewer lives in the United States than traffic accidents, for example. The danger can be kept in perspective and need not block seeing the needs of refugees, the NCC said.

“Not only do we pray and advocate for peace for Syria and all who live in that nation, we are acutely aware that many Syrian Christians are connected directly to member denominations” of the World Council of Churches, the statement said.  
—Religion News Service and added sources

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