

A program the U.S. can be proud of

Refugee resettlement works. Here's why.

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The world is facing an unprecedented refugee crisis, with 65 million displaced people worldwide. In response, the Obama administration has pledged to resettle more refugees in the United States—an increase from 85,000 in 2016 to 110,000 in 2017.

Critics of this pledge are playing on xenophobic themes to make their pitch in an election year. Donald Trump predicts that we'll see a “flood” of refugees. Thirty governors have demanded that the federal government not send Syrians to their

states. In the governor's race in Montana, one election mailer promised that the Republican candidate would "stand up to dangerous refugee programs" and refuse entry to "unvetted refugees."

Much of this reaction is based on a deep misunderstanding of how U.S. refugee resettlement actually works. Three million refugees have resettled in this country since 1975—through a careful, time-tested process that we can be proud of.

Resettlement may be the most difficult way to cross the U.S. border. The screening process can last for more than two years, and refugees are screened through five different federal agencies. Once in the United States, they are helped by a public-private partnership between the government and nine private, nonprofit organizations, including Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, World Relief, and the International Rescue Committee. These agencies organize community and volunteer support for refugees, and they receive and distribute the onetime funds allocated to each refugee for resettlement.

The success of this approach relies on a great deal of coordinated community and volunteer support. Some critics argue that such a labor-intensive, individualized program means that the United States settles too few refugees; others complain that refugees are thrust on unprepared communities. But the program's reliance on community members is what makes it successful. They befriend and connect with refugees who are struggling with everything from buying laundry detergent to American concepts of time.

Only recently did this process become so politically polarizing. Communities made up of people with diverse political points of view have long understood the importance of the United States' response to global crisis. They've learned that refugee resettlement is a mutually beneficial process and that refugees bring diversity, enthusiasm, and joy to their new communities. Residents respond to new arrivals with generosity, care, and hospitality because they know that the economic and social benefits enrich both residents individually and the community as a whole.

Refugee resettlement works because people overcome fear and reach out to help their new neighbors. Now more than ever we need to support this process and resist the toxic fearmongering of politicians looking to score political points.

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