

Trump admin cancels grants to refugee aid agencies, despite legal battles

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A depiction of a refugee being held by Lady Liberty during a protest in Washington, DC, February 4. (RNS photo/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

President Donald Trump's administration is making moves to shutter a decades-old partnership between the government and a group of mostly religious organizations to resettle refugees, with the State Department abruptly canceling grant agreements with all the agencies despite ongoing legal battles.

On Wednesday, refugee resettlement organizations, such as Church World Service, HIAS, and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, say they received “termination notification” letters from the State Department.

“This award is being terminated for the convenience of the U.S. Government pursuant to a directive from US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, for alignment with Agency priorities and national interest,” read one of the letters, addressed to Church World Service, according to a [legal filing from Thursday](#). “The decision to terminate this individual award is a policy determination vested in the Secretary of State.”

Leaders of the faith-based refugee resettlement organizations, which constitute seven of the 10 groups that partner with the government to perform the task, condemned the decision.

“Our status as a resettlement agency based on this termination notice is over,” Danilo Zak, director of policy for Church World Service, said in an interview. He added that CWS is “still trying to figure out the legality” of the action and whether the administration intended to bring the partnership to such an abrupt end, but said, “I think we have to assume it did.”

He also noted the termination did not include a thorough review, which is the typical protocol for canceling a grant.

“We understand this is the result of an exceedingly cursory review of these programs,” Zak said.

He was echoed by Myal Greene, the president of World Relief, an evangelical Christian group.

“With the cancellation of World Relief and other Resettlement Agency agreements, this is effectively ending a 45 year, bi-partisan, refugee resettlement program with the stroke of a pen,” Greene said in a statement.

“As followers of Jesus, we are called to serve ‘the least of these,’ and cutting off life-saving assistance to vulnerable communities is an abdication of that responsibility,” Greene continued. “The Church has long played a role in alleviating suffering, but we cannot do it alone. Our government must uphold its commitment to protecting human dignity and aiding those in greatest need.”

Timothy Young, spokesperson for Global Refugee, a Lutheran organization that assists with refugee resettlement, said all 10 resettlement orgs received the notices.

“Prior to this, we had received a stop work order from State and were hopeful it might be lifted after the administration’s 90-day review—but before that review could even be completed, our grants were terminated,” Young said in an email.

USCCB spokesperson Chieko Noguchi confirmed that they also “received notice from the State Department that they are terminating two of the cooperative agreements that fund much of the work we do in our Migration and Refugee Services department.”

The White House did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The letters come as the government is involved in two separate lawsuits over the president’s decision to freeze the refugee program via an executive order signed his first day in office. On Wednesday, Church World Service, HIAS, and Lutheran Community Services Northwest won a victory over the Trump administration in their lawsuit, known as *Pacito v. Trump*, with a federal judge [blocking](#) the president’s order and calling Trump’s actions a “nullification of congressional will.”

According to The Associated Press, the judge argued from the bench that the president does not have “limitless” authority over refugee admissions, noting the law establishing the program was passed by Congress.

Even so, the Trump administration appears to be using the termination notices to their legal advantage. On Thursday, the federal government [filed a motion](#) in a separate case brought by the USCCB that cited the termination notices, saying the cancellation of grant agreements “leaves open only a question of unpaid money under the cooperative agreements, and, to the extent Plaintiff disputes any reimbursement, the dispute needs to be brought in the Court of Federal Claims.”

Refugee agencies are not backing down, however. In a Thursday filing, lawyers for the religious groups in *Pacito v. Trump* referred to the termination notices as “the latest iteration of the Defendants’ unlawful attempt to dismantle the US Refugee Admissions Program.”

The USCCB took a [similar tack](#) in its own case.

“The government’s termination only confirms the need for preliminary injunctive relief,” read a Thursday filing from USCCB’s lawyers.

In a statement, USCCB spokesperson Chieko Noguchi said that during a hearing on Friday, the judge in the case requested additional briefing in response to the State Department letters.

“We are preparing the requested briefing, which will be filed with the court next week,” Noguchi said.

Since Trump froze the refugee program shortly after taking office, faith-based refugee organizations have reported [widespread layoffs and furloughs of staff](#), hoping to use what funds they have left to serve recently arrived refugees who are still under their care. Refugee groups attribute the swift nature of the layoffs to the sudden freezing of funds for their work—including, according to some agencies, a refusal by the Trump administration to reimburse the groups for work done before the president took office.

In addition to filing lawsuits, some of the refugee groups have staged protests, including one [convened outside the White House](#) earlier this month featuring clergy and lawmakers such as Rep. Jamie Raskin of Maryland. Meanwhile, refugees have been unable to enter the country, and while the Trump administration has expressed support for accepting Afrikaner South Africans as refugees—a characterization rejected by many in South Africa itself, including by [white South African Christian leaders](#)—agencies say they are not sure how members of the group could come to the US.

Episcopal Migration Ministries, another faith-based refugee resettlement agency, has already cut 22 positions since January. A spokesperson for the Episcopal Church said that 97 percent of the ministry’s funding comes from US government grants.

“We understand that work to be discontinued because there’s no new arrivals and no funding,” said Amanda Skofstad, the spokesperson.

Still, the agency’s work will continue for now.

“Our commitment to ministering with and to migrants and refugees is not changed by this,” Skofstad said. “Exactly how we carry that out is a little uncertain for the immediate future. We’re going to have to figure it out.” —Religion News Service