



Response to Texas Governor Abbott's refugee refusal - What's Your Point?

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Published January 19

[What's Your Point?](#)

[FOX 26 Houston](#)

Texas Catholic Bishops call Governor Abbott's refugee refusal deeply discouraging and disheartening

The What's Your Point panel discusses the response from Catholic Bishops and other organizations to Texas Governor Greg Abbott's refugee refusal

HOUSTON - SILVER SPRING, Md. (AP) — A federal judge agreed Wednesday to block a Trump administration executive order that Texas Gov. Greg Abbott invoked to refuse refugees from resettling in the state. U.S. District Judge Peter Messitte in Maryland issued a preliminary injunction requested by three national refugee resettlement agencies that sued to challenge the executive order.

In his 31-page ruling, Messitte said the agencies are likely to succeed in showing that the executive order is unlawful because it gives state and local governments veto power over the resettlement of refugees.

President Donald Trump's administration announced in November that resettlement agencies must get written consent from state and local officials in any jurisdiction where they want to help resettle refugees beyond June 2020.

Agency leaders say the order effectively gives governors and county leaders a veto in the resettlement process. The agencies also argue the order illegally conflicts with the 1980 Refugee Act.

Messitte concluded Trump's order doesn't appear to serve the "overall public interest."

"Refugee resettlement activity should go forward as it developed for the almost 40 years before the (executive order) was announced," he wrote.

Church World Service, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and HIAS — a Jewish nonprofit — filed the lawsuit in Greenbelt, Maryland, on Nov. 21. They are three of the nine national organizations agencies that have agreements with the federal government to provide housing and other services for refugees.

Texas, which took in more refugees than any other state during the 2018 fiscal year, became the first state known to reject the resettlement of new refugees. Gov. Greg Abbott said in a letter released Jan. 10 that Texas "has been left by Congress to deal with disproportionate migration issues resulting from a broken federal immigration system."

The head of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, said the ruling for now puts on hold a policy that was causing "irreparable harm to refugee families and resettlement agency's already. " She added that it essentially reopens the door for now to refugees being resettled in Texas.

"It's a significant day in which the rule of law won," O'Mara Vignarajah said.

At least 41 states have publicly agreed to accept refugees, but a governor's decision wouldn't preclude local officials from refusing to give their consent. For instance, the Democratic mayor of Springfield, Massachusetts, has refused to give written consent for refugees to be resettled in the city.

Trump's order says the agencies were not working closely enough with local officials on resettling refugees and his administration acted to respect communities that believe they do not have the jobs or other resources to be able to take in refugees. Refugees have the right to move anywhere in the U.S. after their initial resettlement, but at their own expense.

Before Trump signed the executive order, state and local officials were given a voice but not a veto in deciding where refugees would be resettled, resettlement agency lawyers said.

During a Jan. 8 hearing, the judge said the president's order essentially changed a federal law governing the resettlement of refugees.

Justice Department attorney Bradley Humphreys said the Refugee Act gives the president "ample authority" to make such a change.

"Why change it now?" Messitte asked. "Is it purely a political thing?"

Humphreys said the executive order is designed to enhance the involvement of state and local officials in the process of resettling refugees. But he insisted it doesn't give them a veto over resettlement decisions.

Messitte said it "borders on Orwellian Newspeak" for the administration to claim that the order is meant to merely "enhance the consultation" between the federal governments and the states and localities.

"It grants them veto power. Period," he wrote in his order.

And giving that veto power to the state and local governments "flies in the face of clear Congressional intent," the judge concluded.

The Trump administration has capped the number of refugee admissions at 18,000 for the current fiscal year. About 30,000 refugees were resettled in the U.S. during the past fiscal year; between 150,000 and 200,000 remain in the pipeline for possible U.S. resettlement while they live abroad, according to Linda Evarts, one of the plaintiffs' attorneys.

Texas Catholic Bishops respond to Governor Greg Abbott's decision to turn away refugees

... an essential aspect of our faith is to welcome the stranger and care for the alien.

Governor Greg Abbott's decision to turn away refugees from the great state of Texas is deeply discouraging and disheartening. While the Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops respects the governor, this decision is simply misguided. It

denies people who are fleeing persecution, including religious persecution, from being able to bring their gifts and talents to our state and contribute to the general common good of all Texans. The refugees who have already resettled in Texas have made our communities even more vibrant. As Catholics, an essential aspect of our faith is to welcome the stranger and care for the alien. We use this occasion to commit ourselves even more ardently to work with all people of goodwill, including our federal, state and local governments, to help refugees integrate and become productive members of our communities.

HOUSTON (AP) — Texas will no longer accept the resettlement of new refugees, becoming the first state known to do so under a recent Trump administration order, Gov. Greg Abbott said Friday.

Abbott's announcement could have major implications for refugees coming to the United States. Texas has large refugee populations in several of its cities and has long been a leader in settling refugees, taking in more than any other state during the 2018 governmental fiscal year, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Since the 2002 fiscal year, Texas has resettled an estimated 88,300 refugees, second only to California, according to the Pew Research Center.

In a letter released Friday, Abbott wrote that Texas "has been left by Congress to deal with disproportionate migration issues resulting from a broken federal immigration system." He added that Texas has done "more than its share."

Abbott argued that the state and its non-profit organizations should instead focus on “those who are already here, including refugees, migrants, and the homeless — indeed, all Texans.”

It wasn't clear how Abbott's letter might affect any currently pending refugee cases.

Refugee groups sharply criticized the Republican governor. Ali Al Sudani, chief programs officer of Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston, predicted that some refugees with longstanding plans to come to Texas would have flights rescheduled or delayed. Al Sudani settled in Houston from Iraq in 2009 and now works to resettle other refugees.

“You can imagine the message that this decision will send to them and to their families,” Al Sudani said. “It's very disappointing and very sad news, and honestly, this is not the Texas that I know.”

Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins said he had met refugees in Dallas who had previously served as interpreters or aides for U.S. soldiers.

“You have people who are fleeing violence, people who are assisting us in the war on terror, who are having the door slammed in their faces,” said Jenkins, a Democrat who is the county's chief administrative official.

President Donald Trump announced in September that resettlement agencies must get written consent from state and local officials in any jurisdiction where they want to help resettle refugees beyond June 2020. Trump has already slashed the number of refugees allowed into the country for the 2020 fiscal year to a historic low of 18,000. About 30,000 refugees were resettled in the U.S. during the previous fiscal year.

Governors in 42 other states have said they will consent to allowing in more refugees, according to the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, which works with local agencies throughout the U.S. to resettle refugees. The governors who haven't chimed in are from Alabama, Georgia, Hawaii, Florida, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Wyoming.

Fierce debates have occurred in several parts of the country, including North Dakota and Tennessee, over whether to opt into refugee resettlement under the executive order. Many Republican governors have been caught between immigration hardliners and some Christian evangelicals who believe helping refugees is a moral obligation.

LIRS is also part of a lawsuit challenging the order. A federal judge on Wednesday heard arguments on a request by resettlement agencies to prevent the Trump administration from enforcing it.

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, LIRS' CEO, called Abbott's decision "a devastating blow to a longstanding legacy of refugee resettlement in the state." Local officials in Houston, Dallas, and other cities will not be able to take in refugees over the governor's objection, she said.

"There are some refugee families who have waited years in desperation to reunite with their family who will no longer be able to do so in the state of Texas," she said.

Abbott has tried to stop refugees before, declaring in 2015 that Texas would not welcome people from Syria following the deadly Paris attacks that November. At the time, the administration of former President Barack Obama

continued to send refugees to Texas and other states led by Republican governors who were opposed to it.

Al Sudani, of Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston, pointed out that even if refugees are resettled in a different state, they can travel freely within the U.S. and move wherever they choose.

“Literally you can take the bus the next day and come to Texas,” he said.