

Federal judge blocks policy that allowed Gov. Greg Abbott to ban refugees in Texas

The decision comes just days after the Texas governor became the first state leader to opt out of the program. The move drew a harsh rebuke from Texas' Catholic bishops.

BY [JULIÁN AGUILAR](#) JAN. 15, 2020 11 AM

A federal judge temporarily blocked a Trump administration policy that would have allowed governors, like Texas Gov. [Greg Abbott](#), and other local leaders to prevent refugees from resettling in those areas.

The Wednesday decision from Maryland-based Judge Peter J. Messitte comes just days after Abbott [became the first and only](#) state leader to opt out of the program. Officials had until Jan. 21 to inform the State Department whether they would participate in the program after the Trump administration imposed the deadline in a September executive order. At least 42 governors, including Republicans, said they would accept refugees.

"By giving States and Local governments the power to veto where refugees maybe settled — in the face of clear statutory text and structure, purpose, Congressional intent, executive practice, judicial holdings, and Constitutional doctrine to the contrary — [the order] does not appear to serve the overall public interest," Messitte said in his ruling.

In November, The Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and the Church World Service sued the Trump administration alleging the executive order violates federal law.

Abbott, who is traveling overseas for an economic development trip, could not immediately be reached for comment.

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, the president and CEO of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, praised the ruling and said it provides critical relief.

"Those who have been waiting for years to reunite with their families and friends will no longer have to choose between their loved ones and the resettlement

services that are so critical in their first months as new Americans," she said in a statement. "This is an important first step, but this fight is far from over. We do not expect the Administration to back down from using these vulnerable people as political pawns."

Texas has been one of the leading states for resettlement in recent years. Resettlement reached a high of about 8,212 people in 2009. Although levels dropped off in 2011 and 2012, they increased to around 7,500 for the next four years, according to State Department data.

Abbott's move drew the ire of the state's Catholic bishops, who called it "discouraging and disheartening."

"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 group said in a statement last week.

Asked Monday about Abbott's decision, the state's senior senator, Republican [John Cornyn](#), said he may have a "private conversation with the governor on that." While he said he can understand why Abbott made the decision, he also said that "legal immigration is a good thing."