

# Statesman

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Opinion

## Opinion: We all lose when Texas rejects refugees

**By Ashley Faye**

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In 2010, the Iraqi couple Ayman Attar Bashi and Raya Thanoon came to Austin fleeing bombings outside their home and threats from government militia members. Within five years, they'd started a small catering business called Baiti Food in North Austin with just \$100. Today, they have three employees, cater to companies like Apple, Stitch Fix, and Dropbox, and make classic Iraqi dishes at their popular restaurant, Pita Shack.

Their success isn't surprising. There are more than 180,000 refugee entrepreneurs in the United States and they start businesses at higher rates than other immigrants and native-born Americans. It's something I see across Austin—and the state—every day through my work with Refugee Services of Texas.

This is one reason it was so shocking for us in the refugee resettlement community when President Trump signed an executive order in September allowing states and cities to refuse refugees, and heartbreaking to see Gov. Abbott's attempt last month to prevent refugees from resettling in Texas.

Gov. Abbott's stance on refugees could not only risk lives, but hurt economic growth, as refugees are a net positive to our economy, paying an average of \$21,000 more in taxes than they receive in public assistance after 20 years in the United States, according to a 2017 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research. They find jobs quickly, typically working after 60 days, and becoming financially self-sufficient within 90 days. Of the nearly 2.5 million refugees that call the U.S. home, about 96 percent were employed in 2017, earning \$91.8 billion, according to New American Economy. They are even required to repay the cost of their airfare to the U.S.

Luckily, a federal judge has blocked President Trump's executive order and Gov. Abbott's decision for now – although the Trump administration is expected to appeal. Refugee resettlement agencies have already suffered greatly from the

declining number of refugees since Trump took office. Historically, our state has resettled the highest number of refugees in the country. Refugee Services of Texas has assisted nearly 30,000 individuals from more than 30 countries since it was founded in the late 1970s. In 2016, we welcomed almost 2,500 of these newcomers. But in 2018, that number plummeted to 800. If Texas were to opt out of the resettlement program for just one year, the state could lose \$17.1 million in income and economic stimulus, according to a New American Economy report.

The actions of the current president and governor will also make our work that much harder when future administrations restore resettlement rates. And they undoubtedly will; the vast majority of states recognize the economic importance and moral imperative of welcoming refugees and immediately told President Trump that they would continue welcoming refugees. This includes 41 governors, of which 19 are Republican.

In the 15 years I've worked in the nonprofit field, resettling refugees has never been a divisive issue, which makes sense. Refugees bring enormous benefits to our city and state, from increased diversity, to cultural vibrancy to economic growth. They're built into our fabric of life, and they even make our communities safer. A 2017 report found that in communities with large refugee populations, nine out of 10 saw a reduction in violent and property crime rates between 2006 and 2015.

It's not just the refugees who will suffer if the judge's decision is overturned – it's all of us.

*Faye is the director of development at Refugee Services of Texas.*