

# Trump policies stop the flow of refugees to Syracuse, once a resettlement magnet

---



[syracuse.com/news/2018/08/trump\\_policies\\_stop\\_the\\_flow\\_of\\_refugees\\_to\\_syracuse\\_once\\_a\\_resettlement\\_magnet.html](https://www.syracuse.com/news/2018/08/trump_policies_stop_the_flow_of_refugees_to_syracuse_once_a_resettlement_magnet.html)

By Marnie Eisenstadt | [meisenstadt@syracuse.com](mailto:meisenstadt@syracuse.com)

August 1,  
2018

Syracuse, N.Y. -- A slight man wearing a sagging backpack puzzles his way through the automatic bubble doors in the arrival gate at the Syracuse airport. It is nearly midnight.

He has traveled across three days and through five time zones. It is the end of his journey and the end of a 20-year-wait.

It is also a rare moment in Syracuse these days. Muhire Serge Eric was one of seven refugees resettled in Syracuse in July. There were two individuals and one family of five.

Two years before, this moment in the airport was on a constant loop: There were 1,400 refugees settled in Syracuse in 2016. And there were about 200 in July, alone, that year.

But now, refugee resettlement is grinding to a halt in Syracuse, across Upstate New York and across the nation.

"It's nearly stopped," said Beth Broadway, president and CEO of [InterFaith Works](#). The agency is one of two in Syracuse that resettles refugees.

It is the end result of a vastly different legal immigration policy under President Donald Trump. One of his first acts as was an executive order that became known as the Muslim travel ban. Trump cut legal immigration from several predominantly Muslim countries.

He also dropped the cap on the number of refugees the U.S. will allow in to 45,000, the lowest it's been since at least the 1980s. And with that came a cut to the staff at the U.S. Department of State that work with refugees. Experts project the number of refugees for 2018 will be about 20,000. (Refugees are counted on the fiscal year, which ends Oct. 1).

In 2017, New York welcomed 70 percent fewer refugees than the year before. That trend has continued downward. For the first two months of 2018, there were just 185 refugees resettled across the state. Spring and summer have been leaner still, resettlement agencies said.

"New York State has a robust refugee resettlement program but, unfortunately, thanks to the federal government's hostility to refugees, fewer individuals have been resettled in New York State than we would like," said Anthony Farmer, a spokesman for the state Office of

Temporary and Disability Assistance, which oversees refugee resettlement operations.



Watch Video At: [https://youtu.be/oNFBzkLKc\\_Y](https://youtu.be/oNFBzkLKc_Y)

### **A refugee resettlement capital**

In 2014, Onondaga County settled more refugees, per capita, than any other county in New York state. And it settled refugees at the third-highest rate in the nation.

Now the board where they put incoming refugees' names at Catholic Charities in Syracuse is nearly bare.

"It's amazing how white that board is when there are no names on it," said Mike Melara, CEO of Catholic Charities of Onondaga County. There are three individuals and one family on the board, waiting to be resettled in August. In July, the agency resettled just one family. Two years ago, July was a banner month: 155 people were resettled in Syracuse by Catholic Charities.

Then, there were six full-time refugee resettlement caseworkers and one part-time caseworker. The program was budgeted for about \$1.5 million. Now, there is one full-time caseworker and one part-time caseworker. The program is expected to lose \$600,000.

Catholic Charities received money from the New York state Legislature to prop it up as federal money that funds refugee resettlement dries up. In 2017, the Legislature set aside \$2 million for refugee resettlement agencies in the state. What agencies received depended

on how many people they had resettled. Catholic Charities received \$230,000. They're expecting a similar amount from the state Legislature this year. That helps fill in the \$600,000 hole.

But the hole looms larger in years to come. Melara does not expect the picture to improve any time soon.

"It's hard to imagine a scenario when the numbers improve over the next couple of years," he said. And he expects it could take as much as two years after the ban is lifted and cap raised for the flow of refugees to return.

Melara, though, has every expectation that when there is a change in administration, the refugees will return to Syracuse. "So, locally, we don't want to get depleted to the point where we can't resettle refugees," he said. He expects the agency will close out its fiscal year in October having settled 125 people.

For now, Catholic Charities continues to keep a skeleton resettlement crew while the \$22 million nonprofit, which operates many other programs, absorbs the loss for now.

"The numbers are easy to share," Melara said. "The hard part I keep coming back to is this knowledge that there are millions of people who are refugees, who are suffering."

The situation at InterFaith Works, the other resettlement agency in Syracuse, is the same. They settled just two people in July and August looks equally slow.

Broadway, the CEO, said the state money is helping and they have shifted resettlement staff to help refugees who are already here. But she, too, expects the situation to stay like this for years.

"We've got to white-knuckle this," she said.

### **'Where are my refugees?'**

While agencies in Syracuse have been able to shift staff around, other operations in New York have had to make more drastic changes to deal with the loss of new refugees.

Buffalo took in so many refugees - 6,000 -- in the past five years that its healthcare system couldn't handle the influx. So in 2016 Catholic Charities of Western New York opened a primary care clinic and a dental clinic to serve new refugees.

The next year, the refugees were nearly gone.

The primary care clinic closed in September. The dental clinic shut down last month. William Sukaly, the program director for the Immigration and Refugee Assistance Program there, said there just weren't enough patients. The agency also had to make some staff cuts.

Sukaly said landlords had been doing redevelopment projects in the city, aimed at housing the new refugees. Those projects have stopped. Like the Syracuse agencies, he hopes to keep enough staff so the agency can be ready when refugees return.

"How will it play out? We don't know," he said.

It is also hard to guess the economic impact from the loss of Rustbelt cities' biggest new population source.

A study released last year found that immigrants, including refugees, contributed \$2 billion in spending power in the Syracuse and Buffalo metropolitan areas.

They fill labor gaps, buy vacant homes and open their own businesses, the study found. It was conducted by New American Economy for CenterState CEO in Syracuse and the International Institute in Buffalo.

"Syracuse, like most rust belt cities, should be looking for ways to regrow its population, because that's good for our economy," said Dominic Robinson, who was part of the team that commissioned the study. He's the vice president of Economic Inclusion for the CenterState Corporation for Economic Opportunity.

"Refugee resettlement has been one of the only reliable, consistent sources of new population in our city. It's unfortunate to see that source of new members of our community and contributors to our economy cut off," he said.

In Syracuse, Broadway said people are starting to feel the ripples created by so few refugees entering the pipeline.

"There's huge infrastructure that gets set up in cities," she said. She's heard from the schools, the hospitals and landlords. "We've had landlords coming in and saying, 'Where are my refugees?'"

Frank Fan manages 120 apartments on Syracuse's North Side, the neighborhood where most of the refugees are resettled.

In years past, his entire rental base has been new refugees. They're good tenants and the rent is guaranteed for a year.

"Basically last year, it completely stopped," said Fan, who came to the U.S. as a refugee from China 30 years ago. He said he's been filling his apartments with other tenants for now, but he hopes the refugees return.

## **Journey's end**

Felicien Seruhungu, the one full-time resettlement caseworker for [InterFaith Works](#) in Syracuse, checks the arrivals board at the airport. He knows well the wait of refugees. He was a refugee, himself. He came to Syracuse about six years ago. His family spent years in a camp in Burundi. His mother was killed during a clash at the camp along with more than 100 others.

"You can be killed at any time," he said. He began as a translator at InterFaith; Seruhungu speaks seven African languages along with English and French. He switched to resettlement two years ago.

Muhire Serge Eric, the refugee from the Congo, steps into the arrivals gate in Syracuse looking lost. Seruhungu waves to him, then embraces him. A moment later, Eric's family rushes in.

"Serge!" yelled Bienvenu Mbuguje as he ran up to Eric. Eric's whole face smiled as his nephew threw his arms around him, hugging Eric and picking him up at the same time. Another nephew ran in. They danced back and forth together as more family gathered around.

His older sister rose out of her wheelchair and walked toward him, holding herself up with a crutch. She gathered him to her and held him, kissing his face and smoothing it as she spoke to him in Congolese.

"I am so happy," Eric said, in English.

*Marnie Eisenstadt is an enterprise reporter who writes about people, life and culture in Central New York. Have an idea or question? Contact her anytime: [email](#) | [twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | 315-470-2246*