

Christian aid group lays off staff in wake of executive order on refugees

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BALTIMORE, Md. (RNS)—World Relief announced it will lay off more than 140 staff members and close five local offices as a “direct result” of President Trump’s order to more than halve the number of refugees resettled this year in the United States.

The Christian nonprofit is one of nine private agencies contracted with the U.S. government to resettle refugees.

“Our staff at each of these locations have served diligently and sacrificially—some of them for many years—and we are deeply saddened to have to make this difficult decision,” World Relief President Scott Arbeiter said.

The layoffs are a loss of “decades of organizational expertise and invaluable capacity to serve the world’s most vulnerable people,” Arbeiter said.

Five local offices close

The cuts affect most of the organization’s local offices, as well as its home office, according to Matthew Soerens, U.S. director of church mobilization at World Relief.

Some staff were laid off before the announcement was made, Soerens explained. The rest of the layoffs and closures will happen “gradually” as World Relief is able to fulfill responsibilities to its recently resettled refugees and church partners.

The five local offices that will be closed are in Boise, Idaho; Columbus, Ohio; Miami; Nashville, Tenn.; and Glen Burnie, Md. Those offices had resettled more than 25,000 refugees total, according to the statement. They were chosen in part because other refugee resettlement agencies also are working nearby where the offices can refer people, Soerens said.

Executive order caps number of refugees entering U.S.

The week before the announcement, World Relief brought together hundreds of prominent evangelicals from all 50 states to sign a letter to the president and vice president expressing their support for refugees.

Judges have blocked the administration from enforcing parts of Trump's executive order, signed Jan. 27 and popularly referred to as a "travel ban."

One element of Trump's order that was blocked was the 120-day suspension of the refugee resettlement program, Soerens confirmed. Also blocked was the temporary halt on anyone—including refugees—entering the country from seven predominantly Muslim countries and the indefinite ban on anyone entering the country from Syria.

But the order still effectively caps the number of refugees the U.S. will accept in 2017 at 50,000.

That number had varied between 70,000 and 85,000 under the Obama administration, and former President Obama had put the refugee ceiling for 2017 at 110,000. The New York Times reported about 30,000 refugees already have been admitted to the United States since the fiscal year started in October.

That puts World Relief "over capacity" to serve the number of refugees who will be allowed into the country over the next year, Soerens said. It previously had anticipated it would resettle about 11,000 refugees this

year. That number likely will be closer to 5,000—most of whom it already has resettled, he said.

Organization expects to take financial hit

And the organization's most significant source of funding comes in the form of one-time, \$2,025 grants it receives for each refugee it resettles from the U.S. State Department, he said.

While World Relief anticipates an increase in donations from churches and individuals, he said, the nonprofit agency also needs to cut expenses. And it still is looking to the future, unsure where the Trump administration will set the refugee ceiling in 2018.

The White House has options to get around judges' partial block of his executive order, including "just filing a brand new order," Trump said.

The organization "will always hold on to hope," Soerens said, but it hasn't seen any indication the president would raise the number of refugees accepted into the country in a new order.

"The longer we hold off on it, the harsher the cuts would have to be," he added.

Impact on other faith-based agencies noted

Other faith-based agencies that work to resettle refugees in the United States include Church World Service, Episcopal Migration Ministries, HIAS (formerly known as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Migration and Refugee Services.

Miji Bell, director of communications for the Lutheran agency, said the organization "will continue to assess the impact of the reduction in refugee arrivals and evaluate that against our staffing needs. In that respect, we

will make adjustments as necessary.”

Church World Service launched an emergency appeal earlier this month to raise \$1 million, saying the order “effectively defunds the entire domestic resettlement network, as CWS local offices and affiliates are paid per capita on a reimbursement basis.”

World Relief was established by the National Association of Evangelicals in 1944 in response to the humanitarian crisis in Europe after World War II, according to its website.

Tim Breene, CEO of World Relief, said in a statement the organization plans “to continue the critical work of resettling refugees and serving other immigrants in the communities where we serve throughout the United States. ... We urge the Trump Administration to renew and reinvigorate efforts to work together with the global humanitarian community to meet this urgent crisis head on.”