

# Major effort needed to rebuild refugee resettlement system

February 2, 2021

Raising the refugee ceiling sends an important signal, but much more is required to rebuild the nation's resettlement system after it practically was dismantled during the past four years, a national security expert and representatives from several evangelical groups agreed.

President Biden announced prior to his inauguration his intention to [increase the refugee admissions cap](#) substantially from historic low levels during the previous administration.

In anticipation of a new policy announcement from the White House, Elizabeth Neumann, senior adviser to the National Immigration Forum on national security matters, participated in a Jan. 27 [teleconference](#) regarding refugee resettlement.

Other participants included Travis Wussow from the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, Matt Soerens with World Relief and the Evangelical Immigration Table, and Nate Bult of Bethany Christian Services.

## 'The problems don't go away'

Restoring and strengthening the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program is essential to national security, said Neumann, former assistant secretary for counterterrorism and threat prevention with the Department of Homeland Security during the Trump administration.



Elizabeth Neumann is senior adviser to the National Immigration Forum on national security matters. She is former assistant secretary for counterterrorism and threat prevention with the Department of Homeland Security during the Trump administration. (Screen capture)

“When we close our doors, ... the problems don’t go away. They’re still out there, and it makes people more bitter against the United States,” Neumann said. “The best way to protect ourselves is to be a welcoming society.”

Both on humanitarian grounds and in the interest of national security, the United States needs to reclaim its seat at the table globally in addressing the problem of 80 million displaced people, she asserted.

“People that are left in limbo are vulnerable,” she said. “They can be trafficked. They can be recruited into gangs and criminal enterprises. They can be recruited into terrorism if they are not cared for and their needs are not addressed.”

During the teleconference, Neumann referred several times to a white paper she wrote in December for the National Immigration Forum, [“Robust Refugee Programs Aid National Security.”](#)

“The United States’ posture toward immigrants, asylees and refugees during the Trump administration has damaged our nation’s security,” she wrote. “Much of this damage is from xenophobic rhetoric, reducing the refugee ceiling to historic lows, and immigration restrictions cloaked in arguments of security but clearly designed to prevent people from

predominantly Muslim countries and poor countries from coming to the U.S.”

Raising the ceiling on refugee admissions will send “a very strong signal to a lot of our partners overseas who feel like the United States has abandoned our previous commitments,” she said during the teleconference.

“It’s about that signal to the rest of the world that we’re back—and we’re not just back; we’re back with a vengeance, and we’re going to take this seriously,” she said.

## **‘Lost a lot of infrastructure’**

However, she and the other speakers emphasized raising the ceiling on refugee admissions is just the first step in rebuilding the resettlement infrastructure after the last four years.



Travis Wussow

“This is a problem that is more significant than just raising a number,” said Wussow, vice president for public policy and general counsel at the ERLC. “It’s also about rebuilding the pipeline for refugee admissions internationally and rebuilding the pipeline in resettlement programs here domestically.”

World Relief has closed eight of its offices in the last few years and shut down resettlement operations in several locations, Soerens noted. Overall, resettlement agencies report a 38 percent reduction in operations and significant decrease in staff, he added.

“We have lost a lot of infrastructure in recent years. ... We are eager to rebuild, but that’s not something that happens overnight,” Soerens said.

Biden has pledged to set the refugee admissions ceiling at 100,000 this year and at 125,000 in 2022. However, teleconference participants emphasized the refugee ceiling as a goal—not a hard number automatically achieved when it is set. Resettlement is a complex process involving extensive vetting of applicants, they noted.

Rebuilding broken infrastructure includes support centers and nongovernmental organizations overseas, as well as the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services system that was “defunded” during the past four years, Neumann said.

## **Historic bipartisan support for refugee resettlement**

The modern U.S. refugee program was birthed under President Gerald Ford in response to the fall of Vietnam and significantly expanded under President Jimmy Carter, who set the admission ceiling at about 200,000, Soerens said.

While the number has fluctuated somewhat over the past four decades, its historic average was about 95,000, and it exceeded 125,000 at times under President Ronald Reagan and President George H.W. Bush, he added.

“In the past, refugee resettlement had broad bipartisan support,” he said.

In the final full fiscal year of the Trump administration, the ceiling was set at 18,000. In the current fiscal year, the ceiling was set at 15,000—a historic low, Soerens said.

After a period of neglect and retrenchment, it is “time for the United States to reassert global leadership” in refugee resettlement, Bult asserted.

“Despite an estimated 1.4 million people in urgent need of resettlement

worldwide, only 22,000 were resettled” through the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees last year—just 1.6 percent of the global need,” he reported.

## **Call for compassionate response**

Noting his agency’s mission to demonstrate the love and compassion of Jesus by serving the vulnerable, he said, “no one is more vulnerable than the 34 million child refugees around the world.”

While research shows a majority of Americans support refugee resettlement, Soerens acknowledged his agency does not want to send refugees to any place where “there is a segment of the population that is misinformed and that makes them unwelcoming.”

Pastors and other Christian leaders can help dispel misinformation and help their congregants understand the strict safety provisions in place for screening refugees, speakers added.

“The fear-mongering that has taken place over the last four years was not founded in actual threat,” Neumann stressed.

Many churches and individual Christians stand ready to help refugees once the broken pipeline is repaired and the dismantled infrastructure is restored, Wussow observed. He characterized Southern Baptists as a whole as “very tenderhearted toward those who are fleeing persecution.”

“Pastors and churches are eager to serve and pick back up where they left off,” he said.