

Where are the Refugees? Moving from Service Provision to Community Organizing

by Noel Andersen
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Today, 65 million people around the world are displaced, including 22.5 million refugees - the highest number in recorded history. Estimates indicate that a person is displaced every 20 minutes.

The United Church of Christ (UCC) has always been very supportive of refugee resettlement programs and congregations throughout the country have welcomed thousands of refugee families through a model known as co-sponsorship. Congregations support arriving refugees in the much needed support of rides from the airport, helping furnish an apartment, or teaching people how to use the public transportation system. The congregation often develops a deep relationship with the family which is often a transformational experience. Starting with President Reagan, refugee resettlement has always experienced strong bipartisan support across administrations, but soon there might not be any more refugees to co-sponsor.

When global need is at its highest, the Trump administration has quickly reversed our nation's long history as a world leader in refugee protection and resettlement. The administration set an all-time low refugee admissions goal for fiscal year 2018 of 45,000 - turning our back on the values of compassion and welcome we claim to represent. What's worse, the administration is on track to resettle only 20,000 refugees this year, not even half of their own goal.

By March 31st, the halfway point for FY18, the administration will have resettled less than 10,000 refugees. This amounts to a broken promise to tens of thousands of refugees who face the most rigorous selection, security vetting, and medical screening process of any traveler to the United States. Resettlement is reserved only for the most vulnerable refugees. While families remain separated and refugees wait - at times in very dangerous or unsafe regions - the administration has imposed a series of refugee bans that seek to dismantle the refugee resettlement program, jeopardize our national security, and devastate families hoping to reunite with loved ones. We have a moral responsibility to fulfill our commitment to resettle at least 45,000 refugees this fiscal year.

Congress has a critical role to hold the administration accountable to keeping its promise to tens of thousands of refugees still waiting to see if they will be resettled this year as they have been promised. After more than 18 months of countless

security checks and years of living in a refugee camp, the administration needs to clear out the red tape that has been purposefully placed to gum up the system, and let the refugees be resettled now.

We know from a faith perspective that we have a moral obligation to welcome immigrants and refugees, but the way that we have traditionally been in solidarity with refugees must shift as the policies shift. Throughout different administrations, including Presidents Reagan, Bush, Clinton and Obama, the refugee program has been well funded and the U.S. was one of the world leaders in receiving refugees. Now, the hateful rhetoric and xenophobic policies of this administration have brought the program to a near standstill. These policies remind us of a dreadful past of racial hatred and fear mongering. We must never go back or give moral ground to those who seek to divide our nation. This means the way in which faith communities' show up to support refugees must also change in order to engage a prophetic and bold witness to speak truth to power and organize our base of support to tell decision makers about why our faith calls us to receive refugees.

To this end, we are working to build a strong United Church of Christ network of refugees and those willing to stand in solidarity with refugees - if you are a refugee, your congregation is comprised of refugees, or you have been engaged in refugee ministry, contact Amanda Sheldon today and help continue to build this movement.

All UCC congregations that have welcomed a family must begin to enable refugee leaders to organize, schedule meetings with their Representatives and Senators, take to the streets, speak with the media, and demand welcoming policies at the state level as we together cry out "Where are the refugees?" Together, we can hold this administration accountable to the 45,000 refugee admissions goal they have set, and remind them of our faithful tradition and commitment to solidarity with those who are facing political or religious persecution, by calling for enough funding for at least 75,000 refugees in FY19.

Find resources about how to take action at the #WhereRtheRefugees toolkit, the UCC Refugee News and come join the UCC Pre-Ecumenical Advocacy Day event Immigrants Welcome: A UCC Response Attack on Immigrants and Refugees.

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