

Detroit refugee aid facility may close due to federal cuts

Our reporters
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Freedom House, a facility in Detroit with a 35-year history helping asylum seekers, recently announced that it may have to close. The announcement followed the loss of more than half its annual budget due to the complete cut-off of federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) assistance funds this year.

About 60 percent of the agency's modest budget of around \$750,000 depended on HUD. Already the usual clientele of about 40 residents has dwindled to 25, as the agency awaits an appeal to HUD to reverse their decision eliminating federal funding. The cuts come at a critical time as the Trump administration ramps up its attacks on immigrant workers.

In the past decade, nearly 1,400 people, many with horrendous physical and mental wounds from torture and violence in their home countries, have survived with the help of the facility. For 35 years, refugees from Freedom House have come from 74 countries, beginning with those fleeing the civil war in El Salvador in the 1980s and more recently including the war-torn Middle East and countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

The program, housed in a building that once served as a convent and located in Detroit's Corktown, is a resource for desperate people fleeing violence around the world. They have provided housing, legal assistance and social services to asylum seekers in the US while they wait out their legal cases.

The current crisis is partly the result of the already utterly inadequate resources for low-income housing and homeless assistance under HUD, especially cutbacks made after the 2008 financial crash.

Indicating the scope of funding distress, in 2010 HUD cut back 100,000 Section 8 Housing vouchers, which assist low income renters, and only around half have been restored to this date. This and new operating rules established under the Obama administration have changed the landscape for funding programs.

With the world facing the largest refugee crisis since World War Two, the need for asylum is greater than ever.

Following press coverage of the HUD cut there was a significant outpouring of support for the facility, but voluntary private donations cannot substitute for stable funding.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Thomas Rogers, TJ, Freedom House program manager, and asked about the public response since major news outlets in Detroit reported the possibility of the agency's closure.

"Publicity has helped," he said. "We've had people wanting to have fundraisers at their businesses. For example, there was a restaurant in Ann Arbor that recently raised over \$1,200 and someone matched the donation, and that kind of thing has been good. One place had a fundraiser where people paid \$50 each to help support us and the event's two sittings were sold out. But it is piecemeal. What we need is sustained funding so we have stability.

"Over 95 percent of our residents are survivors of torture. And the criteria for asylum under US law is very specific and that is that you have to be outside of your country of origin of course. And you have to have a well-founded fear of persecution or a history of past persecution. And that persecution is inflicted upon you by the government or another group or entity that the government cannot or will not control."

He continued, "Also to acknowledge that while it is important that we exist, it is just a drop in the bucket. Every year the UN refugee agency puts out a global refugee report where they talk about forced migration. They have just released 2016 year, it comes out in June, but in 2015 there were almost 65 million globally displaced persons, but specific to asylum seekers there were 3.2 million. Two million of them were newly registered in 2015. So over half were new asylum seekers.

"But specific to the United States, there were just about

173,000 new asylum applicants, which was a 44 percent increase from 2014—the second-largest number of recipients in the world. So every year we help about 150 people out of 173,000. So what we do is a drop in the bucket. And we are the only organization to do what we do.

“There are different places you can go for shelter, different places you can go for legal aid, but no one-stop-shop where you are safe, your basic needs like medical, behavioral health, preparation, the whole 9 yards. When people exit our program you are able to be actually independent and self-sufficient and live in permanent, stable housing.”

The WSWs also spoke to executive director Deborah Drennan, who has been at the facility for more than a decade.

“As far as fundraising goes we have a problem in that we are all competing for the same dollars. More and more agencies are going to be asking the public to fill the gap where the government won’t. We have had a grant from HUD for over 20 years. The political climate now is totally lacking in providing funding for social programs in general. This is going to mean that more places that provide services like ours are actually going to be closing.

“We will see organizations close and I don’t know, can the community and faith-based organizations raise the funds that the government no longer provides? That is not stable funding, which we need. What will happen is that there will be increased competition for donors among these service organizations.

“People come to us who have arrived not only here in Detroit, but who land in airports all around the country and someone helped them get here to us. If the whole idea of the new rapid rehousing model is to get people in a situation where they can become self-sufficient, to get a job and so forth, this is a real problem for people who are like our population who legally cannot work until their asylum cases are resolved.

“We have a very high success rate in our program. And now, by providing services that are needed such as translation help and legal aid, this type of thing, we become even more important. In the present political climate to have all the services needed by asylum seekers under one roof is important when there is a certain risk to someone in their situation just walking around the streets and in danger of being picked up.

“When we talk about putting people in detention before their legal cases are resolved in any of these immigration situations, there is just no logical reason. But in this

climate the advantage of keeping more people in the community, rather than locked up somewhere, is just not considered.

“There is always a greater need for funds for programs. But when the budget is released what you really see is that the government is taking service dollars and putting it into the military and defense. They say they are going to add so much to the military, but this money has to come from somewhere and this means from social services. This is obvious in the present administration but even in previous administrations you find government officials who don’t feel the need for the money to go to people in need.

“They say they are going to add 15,000 ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents and border patrol agents and adding money to the Department of Homeland Security based on the idea that this is going to make the country safer. That is both fiscally irresponsible and morally bankrupt. What would really make things safe is if people were treated in such a way that they are not made socially desperate, that they were allowed to work and be a part of the community and allow them to go to court and sort things out as they should.

“We just had a talk last night. A parent came to us who could not prepare his family to leave so they came with no job, no money, could not even pack suitcases as they fled to seek asylum. When they arrived in the airport in the US they literally did not know what they were going to do next. They came to us. Someone took care of him and his children in their own home and then got them to us here in Detroit.”

The cutoff of funds to Freedom House is part of broader cuts at HUD, which has put its budget on rations. Just this year COTS, another Detroit charity, was denied support to house victims of domestic abuse, as was Cass Community Social Services. The latter had requested funding for another extremely vulnerable population—the chronic mentally ill. It was rejected as HUD has been defunding the category of transitional housing for some months across the country in its perverse rationing scheme.



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