

# Texas becomes the first state to refuse refugee resettlement

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Texas has become the first state to refuse the resettlement of refugees, under the provisions of an executive order (EO 13888) issued by President Trump in September 2019. The order makes the resettlement of refugees contingent on the prior written consent of states and localities.

In his letter to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Texas Governor Greg Abbott declared that his state has had to deal with “the consequences of an immigration system that Congress has failed to fix” and that he had a “responsibility to dedicate available resources to those who are already here.” Therefore, he could not “consent to initial refugee resettlement in 2020.”

Abbott’s decision comes at a time when a federal judge in Maryland is weighing a case filed by three refugee resettlement agencies to prevent the state consent provision in the executive order from taking effect.

Responding to the governor’s claims, Rev. John L. McCullough, president and CEO of Church World Services (CWS), one of three agencies that filed suit against the Trump administration, declared: “Governor Abbott’s decision is cruel, harmful and a rejection of the values of Texas communities. Texas has long been a leading state in refugee resettlement. It also flies in the face of our nation’s legacy of welcome supported by the governors from 42 states who have committed to continue welcoming refugees.”

According to the Pew Research Center, since the 2002 fiscal year Texas has resettled an estimated 88,300 refugees, second only to California, with cities like Houston, Dallas and Fort Worth considered among those most welcoming to those seeking asylum. These historically high numbers have sharply declined in the past four years. According to CWS, Texas resettled around 7,800 refugees in 2016. By 2019, that number

had dropped to 2,458 refugees.

In the past few weeks, numerous refugee resettlement agencies, including a group of 350 evangelical Christians, sent letters to Abbott urging him not to close the door on refugees. However, these pleas were of no avail. The Texas state decision, despite being framed as a specific and timed response to “a broken immigration system,” the onslaught of illegal migration and “limited resources,” is not surprising given Abbott’s political trajectory. This is not the first time that the Texas governor has tried to prevent refugees from resettling in his state.

In the aftermath of the Paris attacks in late 2015, Abbott declared that Texas no longer wanted to take in any of the 5.6 million Syrian refugees who had been displaced since the civil war in that country broke out in 2011. However, at that time, states did not have the legal right to refuse refugees. It was the prerogative of the federal government, which continued to send refugees to Texas regardless of the governor’s stated objections.

Trump’s executive order, issued in September 2019, aimed to encourage ultra-right governors, mayors and other local officials to block refugee resettlement. The official deadline for governors to let the State Department know whether or not they will consent to refugee resettlement is June 1. However, since the agencies dealing with the resettlement process have to submit proposals for federal funding by late January, the de facto deadline is much earlier.

While Texas is the first state to officially communicate its refusal to take in refugees, there have been fierce debates in numerous other states, including North Dakota and Tennessee, about whether or not to decline resettlement this year. According to the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (LIRS), 42

governors have indicated their willingness to take more refugees, while six states have yet to announce: Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, South Carolina and Wyoming, all headed by Republican governors.

The crisis over refugee resettlement, while affected by local conditions in certain states, has to be seen in the context of the vicious ongoing war against immigrants that has been waged by the Trump administration. This war has taken the form of a series of inhumane policies, including family separations, detention, immigration raids and deportations calculated to deter working-class immigrants. In addition, the administration has prioritized militarizing the Southern border while at the same time drastically reducing the number of refugees allowed asylum in the United States.

In January 2017, in one of his first acts as president, Trump issued an order capping the number of refugees admitted into the US that year at 50,000, less than half of what had been proposed the previous year. The cap for the current year has been lowered even further to an astonishing 18,000 refugees in a country of nearly 340 million people. By framing the refugee resettlement question as one of “states’ rights,” the Trump administration is merely trying to pave the way to reduce this cap even further in the coming year.



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