

Federal Agency Joins Battle Against Governors Refusing Refugees

LF ladyfreethinker.org /federal-agency-joins-battle-governors-refusing-refugees/

Joe Mitchell

A federal agency joined numerous faith-based and secular groups supporting the resettlement of Syrian refugees in the United States in their battle with approximately 30 state governors who have declared that such refugees will not be allowed to resettle within their states. In a letter to state and local leaders, Robert Carey, Director of the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (“ORR”) in Washington, warned that Governors and state leaders refusing to relocate Syrian refugees to their states were in direct violation of federal law and American precepts of religious freedom. The director noted that he appreciated the work of the many governors throughout the country who were cooperating with the president’s plan to resettle more than 10,000 [Syrian refugees](#) in this country during fiscal year 2016. He also addressed the concerns of those leaders who were not cooperating with the implementation of the president’s plan:

*ORR is aware that state and local leaders, including some governors, have expressed concern about the resettlement of Syrian refugees in their states. In light of these concerns, we note that the resettlement process begins with the work of our federal agency partners in screening and vetting refugees. **All refugees are subject to the level of security checks of any category of traveler to the United States, a multi-layered and intensive screening and vetting process involving multiple law enforcement, national security, and intelligence agencies across the Federal Government. Syrian refugees are subject to even more precautions than other refugees. It is the most robust screening process for any category of individuals seeking admissions into the United States, and it is only after admission that ORR and our partners in resettlement begin our work.** [Emphasis mine]*

Director Carey went on to point out that the Refugee Act of 1980 requires states to provide assistance and services to refugees without regard to race, religion, nationality, sex, or political opinion, and noted that states may not deny ORR-funded benefits and services to refugees based on a refugee’s country of origin or religion. He warned that any state with such a policy could be subject to “enforcement action” and further added that denying other federally funded benefits, such as Medicaid or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, to refugees who otherwise meet the requirements for eligibility, would be a violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Director’s letter was first obtained and published on Wednesday by the *Houston Chronicle*.

Approximately 19 faith-based and secular volunteer groups who aid refugees have been in a public battle with Texas Governor Greg Abbott and the state’s Health and Human Services Commission (“HHSC”) after the HHSC sent them a letter on November 19 directing them to notify the state of any plans they had to resettle any Syrian refugees in Texas. The letter warned the groups that “...local voluntary agencies who resettle international refugees have a statutory duty to cooperate and consult with the state...” under federal law and that “...we now require that you provide immediate and ongoing consultation with the HHSC Office of Immigration and Refugee Affairs regarding any plans that exist to resettle Syrian refugees in Texas.” The letter ordered the groups to deliver those plans to the agency by 4:00pm the next day,

November 20. It is unknown at this time whether any of the groups complied with the order by the deadline. The letter HHSC was sent at the [direction of the Governor](#).

Bee Moorhead, executive director of Texas Impact, an umbrella group for Christian, Jewish and Muslim faith groups, responded to HHSC's letter by expressing the groups' "shock and dismay", calling it "an unprecedented attempt on the part of a state agency to pressure private, nonprofit organizations to violate federal law and their federal contractual obligations." In a conference call with reporters earlier this week Moorhead called the fight between the volunteer groups and the state "[a religious liberty issue](#)."

Moorhead said "It would be very difficult for Christians to think of themselves as Christian without welcoming 'the stranger'", a reference to [various biblical passages](#) that could easily be applied to the current Syrian refugee situation.

Catholic Charities of Dallas, one of the faith-based groups working with Syrian refugees, responded publicly to the Governor and the HHSC on its Facebook page:

Catholic Charities believes in a compassionate response to those who are fleeing violence and persecution around the world. We are called by the Gospel to reach out to all those in need.

Catholic Charities of Dallas will continue to serve all refugees. We realize we do not work alone in relocating these vulnerable families, women and children who are seeking political refuge. We pray that our leaders will work with the world community to provide safe haven to vulnerable and deserving refugees in dire need of shelter and safety.

We pray for all the victims of the terrorist attack in Paris, victims of terrorism around the world, and for all refugees and immigrants in search of a safer life.

May God bless them all.

When it comes to religious freedom, it appears that Governor Abbott's concept is far from universal. It is "selective." To the governor, as well as Senator Ted Cruz, Attorney General Ken Paxton, and many other Republicans in Texas and throughout the country, religious freedom is of utmost importance when it comes to [protecting homophobes](#) and other fearful (mostly white Christian) persons. But when it comes helping people of various races and religions in dire need, it disappears, or simply doesn't apply.



AUSTIN, TX – NOVEMBER 22: Members of The Syrian People Solidarity Group protest on November 22, 2015 in Austin, Texas. The group was protesting Texas governor Greg Abbott's refusal to allow Syrian refugees in the state. (Photo by Erich Schlegel/Getty Images)