

Jacques: Ingham County still thwarts Catholic group's refugee work

The blatant attack on the First Amendment's right to freely exercise religion may be going away soon.

Ingrid Jacques | OPINION | Nov. 19, 2020

With the holidays approaching and COVID-19 once again on the rise, refugees in Michigan are in need of more help than ever for housing and health care.

St. Vincent Catholic Charities offers these services to hundreds of refugees in the Lansing area. The organization has done this work successfully for decades.

Yet for the second year in a row, the Ingham County Board of Commissioners seeks to limit its association with St. Vincent over a completely different matter, and deny the organization a grant to help with its important refugee work.

The Democratic-controlled board is upset that St. Vincent sued the state of Michigan last year in a case involving its adoption and foster care placement services. Commissioners have slung all kinds of insults at the Catholic charity for standing up for its religious liberty. St. Vincent wants to be able to work with the state without being forced to certify home studies of unmarried or same-sex couples.

So in response, Ingham County commissioners want to distance themselves from what they see as discriminatory practices by St. Vincent. One commissioner last year went as far as to say that St. Vincent is "morally bankrupt."

The board's human services committee voted Monday to withhold a \$4,500 Community Agency Grant from St. Vincent, which planned to use the funding to help refugees with emergency housing support.

The board of commissioners stripped a grant of the same amount from St. Vincent last year. In response, St. Vincent sued the board to reclaim that funding as well as prevent further retaliation in the form of other withheld contracts. That case is still pending.

The finance committee was scheduled to take up the grant on Wednesday but decided to postpone the decision until early December.

The means the board has time to change course. Since the full board of commissioners is still considering the grant, board chair Bryan Crenshaw declined to comment on the human services committee's decision.

Judi Harris, refugee serv director at St. Vincent, says the grant funding would be used to offer \$500-\$600 per family facing a housing crisis.

Other contracts are at risk, too. For the past 20 years, St. Vincent has received a \$128,000 annual contract for refugee health services. That contract almost didn't get renewed last year, and now commissioners only want to renew it for six months, and are seeking new proposals from other organizations for these services.

That could be a problem for the county, though, as the comprehensive support services St. Vincent provides aren't easy to replicate.

"We are the only resettlement agency here," says Harris.

A separate annual contract for \$40,000 supports interpretation services for refugees at health centers.

St. Vincent would like to continue doing all of this work, and is extremely frustrated at the commissioners' actions to hinder its efforts.

Harris says it's confusing that the commissioners say they want to continue opening the county to refugees, while also cutting ties with St. Vincent.

Despite the pushback from county officials, Harris says the support of the community has been greatly appreciated.

Nick Reaves, counsel at religious liberty law firm Becket, is working with St. Vincent in its lawsuit against the county, and says the judge on the case is looking for additional information to determine the motivations of the commissioners in denying the grant. The judge has indicated that if the plaintiffs can adequately back up their allegations, it's likely to prove a successful claim.

U.S. District Judge Robert Jonker is working on both lawsuits involving St. Vincent, and granted it an injunction last year in the adoption case as it is litigated. That suit is currently on hold, awaiting a decision by the U.S. Supreme Court on a similar case out of Philadelphia.

In the meantime, St. Vincent just wants to keep doing its work with refugees in partnership with Ingham County.

“We are helping the county,” Harris says. “It’s a set of skills that only we have.”