

Notes from LSSNCA/LIRS briefing on refugees
2 February 2017
Reformation Lutheran Church (DC)

[LSSNCA = Lutheran Social Services National Capitol Area; LIRS = Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service: main office in Baltimore; advocacy office in DC]

LSSNCA = <http://lssnca.org/>

LIRS = <http://lirs.org/>

LSS Good Neighbor Program =

http://lssnca.org/programs/refugees_immigrant/how_to_help/sponsor.html

Persons speaking:

- Bishop Richard Graham, Metropolitan Washington DC Synod
- Rev. Michael Wilker, pastor at Reformation Lutheran Church
- Christine Connell, CEO, LSSNCA
- Kiersten Rossetto nassar, Outreach and Community Coordinator, LSSNCA
- Mamadou Sy, Executive Director of Refugee & immigration Services, LSSNCA
- Ryan Mace, Refugee Advocacy Officer, LIRS
- Rev. Kevin Jacobson, Assistant Director for Outreach, LIRS
- _____, refugee from Afghanistan

[Note: This information represents situations before the federal judge in Washington State blocked the ban on individuals from the seven countries named in the January 27 Executive Order.]

The Afghanistani man, now living in Virginia with wife and children, explained that he worked for the U.S. government forces in Afghanistan for 12 years. He applied for Special Immigrant Visas (process took 2 years) after receiving threats from Taliban directed toward himself and his family. They arrived four months ago; he now has a driver's license, is working, and is taking English classes. Individuals with SIVs are not covered by the January 27 Executive Order (EO) but are being processed on a case-by-case basis.

Ryan Mace:

- ELCA Bishop Eaton and similar persons in other denominations, various resettlements agencies, advocacy groups, etc., had known about the draft EO for a week before it was issued and had worked to stop it.
- Refugee are vetted more than immigrants and there is MUCH more vetting of Syrian refugees than applicants from other countries. [See link at end of these notes.]
- EO suspends entire program for 120 days for individuals in the seven countries until vetting process confirmed and for Syrians until "sufficient changes" in the vetting process are in place. Department of State and Homeland Security can grant exemptions, especially for SIV applicants.
- So, except for the Syrians, the program could resume on May 27 but only if sufficient safeguards are in place and the EO doesn't explain what "sufficient" means. Even if non-Syrian program resumes on May 27, it is not likely that refugees would arrive that day; suspending the program slows down "the pipeline."
- There will be negative impacts when the program is resumed:
 - a) number of refugees allowed entrance would be reduced from 110,000 to 50,000 (number of refugees worldwide = 21 million); LIRS and others are working with members of Congress to resume resettlement and raise the number to 85,000
 - b) focus on admitting refugees in minority religions (i.e., Christians rather than Muslims)
 - c) determination if local and state governments can be more involved who is resettled in their areas.
- Office has been notified that more anti-immigration bills are being prepared.
- There is an impact of the EO on refugees already in the U.S. The funding to support them for the first 90 days is decided by Congress. The current Continuing Resolution (no federal budget in place for this fiscal

year) expires in late April. Will Congress keep that funding in the resolution when it is extended or when a budget is finally adopted?

-- The federal funding goes to LIRS and is channeled then to local groups (e.g., LSSNCA).

Mamadou Sy:

-- The U.S. refugee program is a community program, not a federal program.

-- During the campaign, LSSNCA and its partner affiliates had been approached by churches and community organizations about what could be done to help refugees trying to come to the U.S. As many matches were made between refugees and congregations. But sponsoring congregations also have to be vetted and that involves much paperwork and time.

-- Through its Good Neighbor Program [link above], LSSNCA will continue to work with congregations in the coming months to be ready when resumption of the program occurs, hopefully in late May; the LSSNCA orientation sessions will resume in early March

Kiersten Rossetto nassar:

-- Yes, the Good Neighbor Program will go forward. It involves background checks and training. Meanwhile, there are four things people can do (see accompanying pdf) to “stand with refugees”:

- a) Use your voice.
- b) Educate others.
- c) Add your name to petitions and letters.
- d) Create an advocacy team.

Kevin Jacobson:

-- Each year there is a Refugee Leadership Academy for recent arrivals to help them learn how to tell their stories so they can return to their new communities to advocate for other refugees; so, invite a refugee to come to your congregation to tell her/his story.

-- Other things to do:

- a) Contact your representatives in Congress and local officials.
- b) Pray (prayers & litanies are on the LSS website).
- c) Sign – and keep signing – petitions.
- d) Tweet.
- e) Use local media to share stories; take pictures of activities and send to local media.

-- An Interfaith Immigration Coalition toolkit will be available soon on the LSS website.

-- Keep checking both the LIRS and LCCNCA websites for new information that can be used in churches and local communities.

Question and answer period followed. The nave was almost full of people representing churches in various denominations, temples, neighborhood coalitions, college alumni groups, etc. [I didn't always note who answered each question.]

Q: How can we help “unsponsored” families?

A: LSSNCA is putting together a packet of information about such families. Christine said that LSSNCA has resettled 1071 families in 2016 and had already resettled 65% of the expected families so far in 2017 [assume she meant FY17, not CY17]. Recent refugees still need support.

Q: Do those persons who were in transit and then turned away remain in the system?

A: Many would have to start over and then be subjected to additional screening.

Q: What are the LSS affiliates and other resettlement agencies doing in red states, especially in small communities and small congregations to educate people?

A: Ten states are being targeted where there will be key senatorial elements in 2018. Staffers will go to synod and district meetings. Christine said to talk to family and friends who live outside this area and encourage them to talk with their friends. Encourage them to go to the LIRS website.

Q: Is there any information about the people who have tickets for future travel to the U.S.? Can they go to other countries instead?

A: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is working on this situation. Also, all are worried about the safety of the persons with SIVs.

Q: Who is helping the people already here who are afraid of being deported?

A: Michael said that a group met that day to support such individuals. There would be another meeting of that group next week at Holy Redeemer Catholic Church. [I didn't get the name of the group but we could contact Michael.] Catholic Charities is also involved.

A: Michael said that there is a large number of undocumented refugees in this area; the biggest groups are from The Congo and Burma. There are also 60,000 unaccompanied minors in the U.S. 70 foster families are needed in this area for unaccompanied minors. One woman said her family had been a foster family and she encouraged people to take the 10-week course.

Q: Can individuals sponsor families?

A: Mamadou said that is possible in Canada but not in the U.S.

Q [from several people]: Our family was supposed to arrive this week or next week. We're ready with housing, furniture, food, mentors, etc. Now what do we do?

A: We don't have answers about when/if your families could arrive after the 120-day period is over. But you could help families already here and/or work with undocumented immigrants.

Q: How do resettlement agencies work together?

A: There is a weekly meeting of such groups to plan actions, share information, etc.

Q: Could the situation get worse?

A: Yes. After the 120-day period is over, other countries could be added to the group of seven named in the EO. Also, the U.S. government could ask governments of other countries to gather information on refugees wanting to leave.

Q: How can DC residents speak to Congress?

A: Michael said that there are worries in general about more Congressional oversight of DC affairs. Rep. Chavetz has already asked for information about how DC is spending money for undocumented immigrants. Michael encouraged people to check what the Washington Interfaith Network is doing; he is co-chair (with Pastor Anthony Minter, First Rock Baptist Church) of the group described as "a broad-based, multi-racial, multi-faith, strictly non-partisan, District-wide citizens' power organization, rooted in local congregations and associations." [The WIN office is at Luther Place Church; website = <https://www.windc-iaf.org/>]

Q: What additional vetting might occur?

A: Mamadou said that the EO doesn't say anything beyond "consistent with national security." Social media will likely be checked more carefully.

Closing comments:

- Michael said that LSSNCA/LIRS is the largest network in the U.S.
- An attendee said that the law schools at Georgetown and American have resources available for groups working with immigrants and also have immigrant legal clinics. She said there are worries about internal enforcement related to immigrants.
- Both LSSNC and the DC office of LIRS need help with administrative tasks due to being swamped by telephone calls, emails, letters, etc. Any volunteer help would be appreciated.
- Given the uncertainty of federal funding after late April, LSSNCA may need to develop funding packages; they may also discover that they will need funding help before then.
- Christine said that donations made to LSSNCA can be directed toward refugee resettlement.
- LSSNCA will create a Facebook page and/or listserv early in February.
- Ryan said that there has not been a terrorist act by a refugee since the 1980 Refugee Act.

- LSSNCA has FAQs about the EO: <https://compassionvann.wordpress.com/2017/02/02/policy-implications-of-the-presidential-executive-order-concerning-refugees/>
- Screening process for refugees: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2015/11/20/infographic-screening-process-refugee-entry-united-states>