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Rally backs refugee resettlement

Service providers defend programs before legislators

Jay Tokasz and Sandra Tan

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The spotlight on refugees and immigrants resettling in the United States grew more intense Thursday, as local refugee resettlement service providers defended their efforts before Erie County legislators and as hundreds of area residents rallied in Niagara Square against calls to ban refugees and Muslim immigrants from entering the U.S.

Waving American flags and condemning terrorism, a few hundred area Muslims were joined by Catholic priests and nuns, a Jewish rabbi, and Presbyterian, Baptist, Lutheran and Episcopal clerics – as well as dozens of other sympathetic participants – in rebutting Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump’s call to have Muslims barred from the country.

The 90-minute rally on a windy afternoon followed a passionate defense of local refugee resettlement efforts earlier in the day inside county legislative chambers.

“We are here to celebrate America, the America that is free for persons of all religions, that we respect with dignity all of those who live here, whatever their religion or nonreligion, and that we have an open door as expressed in the Statue of Liberty. We say welcome,” said the Rev. Stanford Bratton, director of the Network of Religious Communities, which helped organize the rally.

Taher Abdellatif walked across Niagara Square with a sign that read “Muslims Against Terrorism,” bracing himself against a stiff breeze off Lake Erie.

The Grand Island resident made a decent life for himself in Western New York, operating corner stores and small hotels before retiring from business a few years ago.

He said he couldn’t sit by idly as rhetoric against Muslims heated up. Terrorism has nothing to do with the practice of Islam, just as in other major religious traditions.

“We have the good, we have the bad. Just like everybody else,” he said. When Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh killed people, no one pointed to his Christianity as the reason, said Abdellatif.

Nehand Abdelhay’s placard was “We Condemn ISIS.” The Dec. 2 shooting in San Bernardino, Calif., that killed 14 people and injured 22 others and was deemed an act of terrorism by a married Muslim couple, Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, has prompted non-Muslims

to ask Abdelhay for his thoughts. Abdelhay's response? "It's horrible. When a psycho can take another person's life, it's crazy," he said. "But it's unfair the way the Muslim religion is now stereotyped."

Abdelhay, of Williamsville, arrived with his daughter, Nawad, a student at Erie Community College.

"We're just trying to spread the word that all we want is peace in America and we are fighting against terrorism, too, and we're just as much American as the rest of the people here," she said.

Buffalo resident Lucia Sommer stood on a marble bench with a handmade sign that featured a red heart and the words, "Welcome Refugees."

"It's important that we all take a stand against the hateful rhetoric against refugees, Muslims and immigrants that we hear coming out of many of our presidential candidates," said Sommer. "It's important that we all stand together and don't let fear divide us and distract us from the real issues."

Earlier Thursday, the Elma Town Board put forth a resolution to the Legislature urging County Executive Mark Poloncarz to suspend the resettlement of refugees in Erie County, stating that refugees are inadequately screened and pose an economic burden on schools and social services because they don't speak English. The board also claimed that many, "if not most," of these refugees are military-age men "who have not been screened by anyone."

Refugee service providers and representatives for the Department of Social Services tried to address concerns regarding the influx of refugees – particularly Syrian refugees – at a hearing of the Legislature hours before the rally.

A terrorist attack in Paris that killed 129 people prompted County Legislator Joseph Lorigo, C-West Seneca, in November to question whether the county should welcome Syrian refugees. Lorigo also called for a public hearing on the potential safety threat and financial burdens they may cause the county, comments that ignited a broader public conversation about the place of refugees in this community.

Nearly 1,500 refugees were settled in the county by agencies last year, said Eva Hassett, executive director of the International Institute of Buffalo. Hassett spoke on behalf of four area agencies that resettle refugees in Western New York.

She referred to a recent report by the CATO Institute, a public policy think tank. The report found that of the 859,629 refugees who have entered the United States since 2001, three have been convicted of planning a terrorist attack abroad and none have perpetrated a domestic attack.

Lorigo, who led the informational session, said he understood that while the likelihood of a terrorist attack by refugees was low, he wanted further discussion about security.

At the rally, Poloncarz said he was "a little dismayed" by the level of discourse in the community and across the country when it comes to refugees and immigrants.

“We are better than that as a community. We are better than that as a country,” he said.