

3 Arkansans in House oppose settling refugees in state

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Three Arkansas congressmen said Monday that they could not support an expansion of refugee resettlement in Arkansas even as a Fayetteville nonprofit organization prepares to help at least one refugee family settle in the area before the end of the year.

Reps. Steve Womack, Rick Crawford and Bruce Westerman, all Republicans, wrote to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry to express concerns over the vetting of people fleeing Syria and other areas of conflict because of religious or political persecution. They said they were particularly concerned after the nonprofit Canopy Northwest Arkansas successfully pushed to make Northwest Arkansas an official refugee resettlement location.

"Although we are grateful for the heart behind Canopy NWA and the welcoming spirit that is a mark of Arkansans, we are gravely concerned with the current vetting process, as well as the lack of coordination between the Department of State and the actual states resettling refugees," the congressmen wrote. "As representatives of the people of Arkansas, we cannot support a program that could threaten the national security of Arkansans and Americans."

Canopy, in a statement, said its members, many of whom are tied to local churches, were "grateful that our elected leaders are looking out for the safety and well being of our community."

"As their constituents, we expect nothing less," the statement said.

Canopy members in recent interviews also said that while people have legitimate questions about security, refugees need compassion and help.

"We know that there are people who are suffering in the world, that are trying to escape from horrible, almost incomprehensible situations," Mike Rusch, a member of the Canopy board and Marine Corps veteran, said last week. "We know this would be a great place to offer refuge to people who are looking to start over again."

Governments around the world have wrestled with how best to deal with the largest number of displaced people in history, including the millions pouring out of Syria during its five-year civil war, according to the United Nations. Most have fled to nearby countries and into Europe, but

several thousand Syrians have also been admitted into the United States, and President Barack Obama's administration plans to raise that number in the current fiscal year that began Oct. 1.

Several U.S. politicians, including Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump, have balked at the number, saying some could be terrorists posing as refugees. They point to attacks like the one in Paris last November, which killed 130 and was carried out by European citizens linked to the Islamic State terror group in Syria and Iraq. Trump has repeatedly called Syrian refugees "a Trojan horse" at his campaign rallies.

Refugees and their families are interviewed by the U.N.'s refugee agency to see if they qualify for refugee protection and to check their stories for consistency. If they pass, they're referred to several countries that accept refugees, according to the State Department. They're then scrutinized by the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other agencies for any criminal history or links to terrorism.

FBI Director James Comey told a congressional committee earlier this month that while the process is thorough, agencies don't have files on everyone who applies to be a refugee.

"The bad news is, there's no risk-free process," Comey said.

The Arkansas congressmen's letter Monday referred to Comey's comments as a major reason for their concerns and criticized the federal government for not sharing more information on who's being resettled.

Research from the conservative-leaning Cato Institute found the chance of being killed by a refugee in the U.S. is about 1 in 3.6 billion per year. Death by lightning strike is about 21,000 times more likely, according to the National Safety Council.

Once a refugee's accepted, groups such as Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service help the refugee find housing, a job and become accustomed to running a household in the U.S. Canopy has been working with the Lutheran service for the past year or so and will provide those services to whomever the larger group sends its way, Canopy members have said previously.

Rusch said Canopy expects at least two or three refugee families by the end of the year, perhaps growing to about 100 people per year after that. In comparison, about a dozen refugees from around the world were sent to Arkansas last year, according to the State Department.

"We will start slow and make sure we're doing everything that we should be doing," he said.

Several dozen volunteers have signed up to help the families, with around 50 attending an orientation and training session Saturday at Fayetteville's Good Shepherd Lutheran Church. Most were middle-aged or older. Many belonged to church groups or worked for public schools, and members of the Islamic Center of Northwest Arkansas filled one table.

Those volunteers will become a friendly face in a strange land for the families, welcoming them at the airport and teaching them the details of daily American life, Emily Linn, Canopy's director, told the group.

Rusch and Linn said the group had been the target of threatening and intimidating comments on social media since making its goals public. Linn recalled a now-deleted message in which the sender hoped refugees would rape the women in Canopy. Linn said the group realized it needed to protect refugees' identities once they arrive.

But Linn and Rusch were still optimistic about Canopy's mission. Linn told volunteers she was proud of eventually increasing Arkansas' number of refugees, and Rusch said Northwest Arkansas has a "proud tradition" of accepting others who need help, including its large Marshallese population.

"We have spent a lot of time just talking to people who have legitimate questions," Rusch said of the concerns about refugees. "It's been a wonderful opportunity just to open people's eyes."