

The Charlotte Observer

I helped resettle N.C. refugees - they appreciate our freedoms more than we do

Tessie Castillo

February 2, 2017

As a former refugee case manager, I have resettled refugees from all over the world here in Raleigh, including from countries where migrants are now banned from travel, such as Iraq and Somalia. I am deeply concerned about the recent actions of our president to institute a temporary ban on refugees and migrants from several predominantly Muslim countries. More concerning than the executive actions themselves is the misinformation behind them. We need to set the record straight on a few things.

First, refugees are already the most heavily vetted group of travelers to enter the United States. There are 21.3 million refugees in the world who have been forced to flee their homes due to war, conflict or targeted persecution. Last year the United States admitted fewer than 85,000 refugees (over half were children). These refugees were subject to an intense screening process by the Department of Homeland Security that takes an average of 18-24 months to complete. They undergo detailed security checks, multiple in-person interviews, medical screenings, fingerprinting and biometrics, and biographical data collection which is checked against U.S. government databases and terrorism watch lists, including the FBI, the Departments of Homeland Security, State, and Defense, the National Counterterrorism Center and other intelligence agencies. A total of nine separate U.S. law enforcement and anti-terrorism agencies vet each refugee.

Once approved, the refugee is placed with a resettlement agency in the United States. The agency is sent a stack of information on the refugees' background, religious affiliation, medical history, and family ties long before they set foot on our land. As a case manager, it was my job to use this information to prepare for the refugees' arrival and help them through the process of finding housing, work, school enrollment, English classes, and more. To say that we "don't know who the refugees are" is simply false. We know more about them than we know about our own neighbors.

Second, refugees do not live indefinitely off public assistance. The federal government grants each refugee a one-time payment of \$925 (the money is actually given to the resettlement agency and the case manager spends it on rent, furniture, utilities, food, and other necessities). Refugees are required to pay the U.S. government back for the cost of their flight to the United States. In North Carolina, refugees are eligible to sign up for public assistance (\$181 per month for a single person) for a maximum of eight months. However, the assistance is cut off as soon as they start working and most refugees coming to Raleigh have jobs in one to three months. Refugees can also apply for Medicaid, but that is also cut off after eight months for single refugees and after 12

months for families. After five years, refugees are eligible for U.S. citizenship, which is granted if they pass a written and oral English proficiency exam, a U.S. history test, a series of background checks and swear an oath of allegiance to the United States.

Many refugees have proven their commitment to the United States before they even get here. Most of the refugees I resettled from Iraq, for example, had worked for the U.S. military during the Iraq War. In Iraq, these families had been harassed and threatened by terrorist groups. Their names were on terrorist hit lists. In fact, many of the families I welcomed at the airport were already missing a father or a son, murdered by a terrorist's dirty bomb as punishment for helping our military. These families have sacrificed more for our country than most of us ever will. We should give them a hero's welcome. Instead we are turning our backs and closing our doors.

We should not let fear alone guide policy. The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, calculated the odds of being killed by a refugee terrorist in the United States at 1 in 3.6 billion. Why are we afraid of this? Fear is what terrorists want. They want us to fear each other, hate each other, and stop helping each other. They want the most vulnerable people in the world to have nowhere to go. And they want to kill our deepest held American values – our freedom and our willingness to share it with others.

As a case manager, I spent many evenings talking with refugees about the places and situations they had left. Some of these conversations left me shaken for weeks. They have lived through horrors we can only imagine in movies. But one thing I do know. Refugees are deeply grateful to the United States for the opportunity to mend their shattered lives. In fact, they appreciate our freedoms more than we do.

I would challenge anyone who fears or questions refugees to volunteer with a local resettlement agency. Get to know a refugee family. Ask them where they came from and why they are here. Go with an open mind and you will find that there is much more that unites us than divides us. We cannot and must not turn away from the openness and generosity that our country is known for because terrorists and a few politicians have convinced us that a 1 in 3.6 billion chance of death is worth shedding the very values that define us as Americans.