

# The Miami Herald

## Confused about the refugee issue? Here are answers to questions

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February 15, 2017

As President Trump's executive order thrust refugees into the national spotlight, Florida House lawmakers were preparing a plan to pull the state out of the federal program that assists refugees after they arrive in the country.

Thursday morning, the House's Children, Families and Seniors Subcommittee will vote on legislation ([HB 427](#)) by state Rep. David Santiago, R-Deltona, to remove Florida from refugee resettlement.

Here's how the refugee resettlement program works — and what it might be like if Florida removed itself.

### *What is refugee resettlement?*

When people are forced to flee their home countries to escape war, persecution and violence, the United Nations designates them refugees. Many of these displaced people apply to be resettled in a new country, occasionally the United States.

### *How does it work?*

Before they can be resettled, refugees go through a lengthy vetting process that can take as long as two years.

Those headed to the U.S. go through interviews and several background checks with the UN, State Department, FBI, Department of Homeland Security and Department of Defense.

Once approved, the federal government identifies a place to send them in the U.S., ideally situating refugees with any family already in the country or near communities of people from their home country. Local charitable organizations work with the state and federal governments to secure housing and help refugee families settle in, find work, and learn English.

“The local agency would get ready to receive that family, and that includes through donations and community relationships getting an apartment, furniture, helping them apply for state benefits,” said Ingrid Delgado, a lobbyist with the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops, who used to be involved in the Catholic Charities of Florida's refugee work.

### ***What kind of support are refugees eligible for?***

Refugees are allowed up to eight months of limited cash assistance and medical services, which are funded by the federal government but managed by the state.

The state also works with providers like Catholic Charities to provide job training, English classes and help finding work or enrolling children in schools.

### ***How many refugees come to Florida?***

In 2016, 3,272 refugees were resettled in Florida, according to State Department data.

Primarily, they settle in Miami-Dade, Duval and Hillsborough.

But that data doesn't include another large source of migrants eligible for refugee services that call Florida — and especially South Florida — home: Cuban and Haitian migrants.

Until Jan. 12, the “wet foot-dry foot” policy granted Cubans who arrived on U.S. soil permission to live in the country. A related program still allows some Cubans and Haitians to enter the country on a humanitarian basis. From October 2015 to September 2016, 55,150 Cubans and Haitians came to Florida under those rules.

### ***Where are refugees from?***

The short answer: All over.

Excluding Cuban and Haitian entrants, the most common countries of origin for refugees are Syria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Burma and Colombia, according to the State Department.

### ***Why are refugees so controversial right now?***

Through the 2016 election, then-candidate Donald Trump called for “extreme vetting” of refugees. Last month, he issued an executive order that would have banned Syrian refugees permanently and refugees from other countries for 120 days had it not been blocked by federal judges.

In the Florida House, lawmakers started pushing for the state to leave the refugee program before the executive order was signed.

Their concern, ostensibly, is that refugees pose a threat of terrorism, and they point to incidents like the attacks in 2015 in Paris, where terrorists posed as refugees to gain access to the country.

“We’re in a changing world, and for us to just think that we don’t continually need to respond to what’s happening puts our citizens at risk,” Santiago said in a hearing on refugees last month.

### ***How legitimate is the threat?***

Gov. Rick Scott and House Speaker Richard Corcoran, R-Land O'Lakes, have both called for more information about the refugees coming to Florida, saying lack of data harms law enforcement's ability to respond to potential threats.

But the libertarian Cato Institute reported on Jan. 28 that from 1975 to 2015, just 20 refugees have been involved in terrorism or were planning terrorist attacks, and just three American deaths can be attributed to them.

No terrorist incidents in Florida can be attributed to refugees, Mark Glass, special agent in charge of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement's Office of Statewide Intelligence, told lawmakers last month.

He said others can, including an attack at Ohio State University in November where the only death was the perpetrator. In total, he pointed to seven acts of terrorism attributed to refugees and 32 to refugees' children globally in the last two years.

### ***Can a state stop accepting refugees?***

Not entirely.

Federal law allows states to back out of the refugee program. In the state's place, the federal government is supposed to partner with nonprofits.

Last year, several states did just that, including Texas, Kansas and New Jersey.

In Texas, four nonprofits are filling the role of the state, including Refugee Services of Texas, where CEO Aaron Rippenkroeger says his team is trying to make the transition as smooth as possible.

"There's still thousands of people who are eligible for these services that are here right now, and if you were to cut them off from one day to the next or one month to the next, you really are looking at some pretty horrible humanitarian issues," he said.

The switch from the state to nonprofits has not led to a decrease in the number of refugees being resettled in Texas, or the taxpayer money used to support them.

However, organizations like Refugee Services of Texas are now negotiating with insurance companies and working directly with the federal government to provide cash assistance. The state is no longer serving as a middle man and has even less access to information than before.

### ***What would change if Florida pulled out of the program?***

It's likely Florida would look a lot like Texas if lawmakers decided to pull out of refugee resettlement, Delgado said.

Florida would give the federal government 120 days notice, and the feds would find charities in Florida to work with instead, likely including Catholic Charities.

There is still some uncertainty about the impact on taxpayer costs, though. Texas is the only large state to have done this, and its nonprofit-driven structure went into place Feb. 1.

“It’s new terrain,” said Michael Sheedy, executive director of the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops. “While we could cobble together a system like they have in Texas, we’d rather not do it. We’d rather continue to focus on the good work we’re already doing.”