



## **Local Nonprofit, Student Organization Prepares for Refugee Advocacy Event**

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President Donald Trump recently announced plans to cap the number of refugees admitted into the U.S. at 45,000, leading a local nonprofit and UA Registered Student Organization to focus less on resettling refugees and more on advocating for new refugee arrivals.

Canopy Northwest Arkansas, a nonprofit working to support refugees resettling in the community, has resettled 54 refugees, including about 20 children, over the past year. These refugees come from areas including the Democratic Republic of Congo, El Salvador, Cameroon, Burma and Iraq, said Lauren Snodgrass, community outreach coordinator for Canopy NWA.

Students For Refugees, a UA RSO, has partnered with Canopy NWA to raise money for the nonprofit and help resettle refugees.

Emily Crane Linn, Canopy NWA resettlement director, is concerned about Trump's plans to cap the number of refugees allowed into the U.S., she said in a statement on Canopy NWA's website.

There are approximately 22.5 million refugees in the world, and half of them are under the age of 18, according to the U.N. Refugee Agency.

“In the midst of the greatest refugee crisis in history, with over 23 million people needing immediate refuge, the U.S. has just announced that it is stepping back,” Linn said in an update on the organization's website. “This is devastating to us. Our hearts break for the thousands who could have found safety and new beginnings on our shores but who instead are being left in peril.”

In an effort to show NWA residents what it's like to be a refugee and teach Arkansans about refugees' hardships, SFR is partnering with Canopy NWA to create a Refugee Camp Experience, Garross said.

Refugees spend an average of 20 years “uprooted from their lives,” according to UNHCR.

SFR and Canopy NWA partnered last spring to host another event like this in the UA Garden called the Mock Refugee Camp. At the camp, students and local organizations caught those present about the issues facing refugees, Garross said.

SFR volunteers will be working the Refugee Camp Experience at the Bentonville Public Library on Oct. 21 from 1-3 p.m.

At the event, visitors will be given a passport with a new identity and walk through several stations designed to show what it is like to live in a refugee camp. These stations include medical, mental health, kids, food and water and sanitation stations.

These different stations address topics specific to what refugees face, Garross said.

Last spring, about 500 people attended the event, including Angela Oxford, director of the UA Center for Community Engagement, Snodgrass said.

To Oxford, the event was “very authentic and powerful” and showed her and her daughter the problems refugees face in refugee camps, she said.

“I had no idea how powerful the experience would be,” Oxford said.

Trump’s new cap on refugees will be the lowest number in over 40 years but how that will affect Canopy NWA’s work remains unclear, Linn said.

“Our country seems to be questioning whether or not refugee resettlement is worth it,” Linn said.

Canopy NWA expects further money cuts in the next year because of the lowered cap, Snodgrass said.

Last year, Canopy NWA’s state-given money was nearly cut in half, Snodgrass said. This is because the state gives money to the nonprofit based on how many refugees they resettle, and because Canopy NWA resettled 54 refugees instead of their estimated 100, money given to Canopy NWA was cut accordingly.

The nonprofit receives about around \$366 per month for three months per refugee. Because they were expecting to resettle 100 refugees, they anticipated \$50,000 more to be given to them by the state, Snodgrass said.

Through frugality and \$90,000 in donations, Canopy NWA managed to compensate for the loss in money.

In the upcoming year, they expect to resettle 75 refugees. This number, as well as last year’s, is estimated with help from the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, Snodgrass said.

“These are very uncertain times,” Snodgrass said. “We remain hopeful but cautious.”

About half of Canopy NWA’s money comes from the U.S. Department of State, but the rest comes from grants and community donations. Since October 2016, the organization received

over \$90,000 from community donations. In September, they raised \$22,000, which exceeded their goal of \$20,000 for the month.

SFR has shifted its focus following Trump's cap, said Jessica Garross, SFR president and co-founder.

Instead of focusing on direct involvement with refugee resettlement, SFR officers plan to focus on educating people who might be in favor of this cap, she said.

Sen. Tom Cotton (R) has not released a statement about the lowered cap, but in a previous statement released Jan. 29, Cotton said "most Americans support these common-sense measures" to limit refugees' entrance into the U.S. This was in reference to Trump's executive order banning citizens from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen from entering the U.S. for 90 days.

The executive order signed Jan. 27 banned immigrants from Syria, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Yemen and Somalia from entering the U.S. for 90 days. It also indefinitely banned Syrian refugees from entering the U.S.

"Our country needs strong borders and extreme vetting, NOW," Trump said in a tweet two days after signing the executive order.

To Garross, there is "always another ban," which generally comes from a place of misunderstanding, she said.

"It's feeding into fear, and it's making it seem like refugees are dangerous when they're not," she said. "You're more likely to get eaten by a cow than killed by a refugee."

Twenty-two people are killed yearly by cows, according to Mother Nature Network, and no refugees have attacked Americans since the '70s, according to the Cato Institute.

Garross realized the magnitude of the refugee crisis when she worked in a refugee camp in Lesbos, Greece. While studying abroad, she arrived in Lesbos during her 2015 fall break two weeks after a ship of 300 refugees capsized, resulting in the deaths of half those onboard.

While working in a refugee camp near the shores, bodies were still washing up onshore from the capsized boat, Garross said.

"I didn't know much about the refugee crisis," Garross said. "I didn't know a lot at all until that experience."

After returning from Lesbos, Garross co-founded SFR with alumna Jamie Nix, and began partnering with Canopy NWA to resettle and advocate for refugees in Northwest Arkansas, she said.

Garross has befriended several refugee families living in the area through working with Canopy NWA, she said.

These families live all across Fayetteville, and Canopy NWA's money helps pay their rent, get them food and assist them meeting a case manager and employment specialist to help them be successful, Snodgrass said.