



Our view: Refugee policy takes toll on Erie

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If President Donald Trump wants to protect Erie, he could start by making his months-old declaration of an opioid public health emergency more than empty words.

That scourge of addiction and overdose deaths has claimed lives here by the hundreds and continues to do so at an ever-increasing rate. The crisis inflicts terrible pain and loss on families, and burdens virtually every strand of the social safety net from the criminal justice system to social services.

Instead, in the name of safety, the president is vigorously pursuing misguided immigration policies that are harming, not protecting, Erie.

As Erie Times-News reporter Madeleine O'Neill detailed, the numbers of refugees being resettled in Erie have dropped sharply in the wake of Trump administration immigration restrictions premised on the problematic notion that the nation's immigration system threatens national security.

Trump's administration capped refugee admissions to the United States for the 2018 fiscal year at 45,000, less than half of the 110,000 permitted the previous year.

The International Institute of Erie typically resettled about 450 refugees annually. In the 2017 fiscal year, the agency only resettled 292 and may not reach its goal of 270 resettlements in this fiscal year. The Institute has had to lay off three case managers.

Trump's immigration policies, including executive orders dictating travel bans and extreme vetting, are hurting Erie families like Syrian couple Samir Dabbah and Safwat Jarkas. They fled civil war in Syria in 2011 and waited in Jordan for six years before they were permitted to enter the U.S. to join their son, Bassam Dabbah, 36, a U.S. citizen who owns a grocery store at East 11th and Wayne streets. Two of their adult children were not permitted to travel with them and remain stranded in Jordan for reasons that have not been made clear.

Immigrants have long been the lifeblood of this city. Amid the recent decades of economic decline, the Erie region became one of the nation's fastest shrinking. The arrival of refugees and immigrants, including 3,900 between 2012 and 2016, helped to mitigate that trend.

The new residents, many fleeing areas of humanitarian crises, start new businesses, including inner-city grocery stores that shrink Erie's food deserts. Local manufacturers turn to refugees in Erie to fill low-skilled jobs "shunned" by Americans, as the Wall Street Journal detailed in 2017. They rent and purchase housing.

These policies robbing Erie of its refugees are harmful and likely ineffective, given the prevalence of domestic terrorism. A Cato Institute report found "that a total of 155 people were

killed on U.S. soil in terrorist attacks since January 1, 2002, 34 of them by foreign-born terrorists and 121 of them by domestic terrorists.”