

U.S. economy needs refugees as much as they need us: Guestview

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With unemployment hovering at record lows, there are hundreds of thousands of jobs available in health care, service, manufacturing, construction and other industries that Americans alone can't fill. "Never before have we had an economy where the number of open jobs exceeds the number of job seekers," Labor Secretary Alexander Acosta said.

The 3.2 million refugees who have come to our shores since the refugee resettlement program started in 1980 make up an important part of the American workforce. And more could do so if we let them in.

But the Trump administration is decimating U.S. resettlement — by reducing slots to historic lows and chopping the legs out from under the program. This year we will see the lowest resettlement numbers in our history, perhaps 20,000 compared to an average of 95,000 annually. And the administration may shrink the official cap even more for 2019.

With an unprecedented 25 million refugees living in exile for an average of 20 years before going home, the decimation of U.S. resettlement is a tragic abdication of global leadership. It also leaves many jobs unfilled and many industries hurting.

Meat packing plants and lumber mills that rely on refugee employees need many more. Manufacturing and other industries across the country are looking to hire refugees.

I used to help refugees find work in the U.S. They often took jobs that Americans didn't want. What I heard from employers then — that refugees were dependable, dedicated, fast learners and long-stayers — has now been captured in a new nonpartisan report, *Refugees as Employees: Good Retention, Strong Recruitment*. It found that turnover rates were up to two thirds lower for refugees than for employees overall, and that when a few refugees succeed, it's easy to recruit many more.

That's not surprising. The experience of losing your home and having your life shattered lights a fierce and unique kind of fire to regain control and reestablish yourself.

This is perhaps why refugees are so entrepreneurial. In cities like Lewiston, Maine and St. Louis, Missouri, once depressed downtown areas are now flourishing thanks to refugees who saw opportunities and started businesses in the shuttered shops and buildings on main streets.

A PBS News Hour report highlights that Utica, New York's commitment to resettling refugees is "a pioneering economic tool for revitalizing the Rust Belt." A government study found

that refugees contribute \$63 billion more to the U.S. economy over 10 years than they take in services.

Refugees everywhere want to contribute. A new refugee Talent Catalogue with more than 10,000 profiles in the Middle East highlights engineers, accountants, teachers, health care, computer and IT professionals, and others ready to work. Paul Polman, the CEO of Unilever, suggested that the vast Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan could essentially be emptied out to fill labor needs across Europe.

Canada sees an opportunity here to connect refugees with jobs in Canadian territories where unemployment hovers below 3 percent in some cases. Working with several organizations including RefugePoint, the group I lead to help the most at-risk refugees, Canada is supplementing its resettlement program with an Economic Mobility Pathway Project aimed at bringing in more refugees.

If you just listen to Trump, you'd think we must stop bringing in refugees because they are dangerous. But that's simply false. The Cato Institute estimates that the chance of an American being killed by a refugee terrorist is one in 3.64 billion. Vetting can take up to two years. Many of our country's top Republican security advisers say a robust resettlement program is in our national security interest because it helps stabilize front-line countries hosting the most refugees. (The U.S. ranks 18th among refugee hosting countries.)

Our president will determine the 2019 resettlement numbers this month. There are many reasons to increase resettlement: The refugee crisis is unprecedented. Resettlement is lifesaving. It's stabilizing for a world in turmoil. We host relatively few refugees comparatively. Our actions influence other countries. The welcoming ethos is a defining national characteristic. Resettlement is in our national security interest. It doesn't compromise our safety, and has always enjoyed bipartisan support.

But perhaps the economic argument is most important today: Resettlement helps fill otherwise un-fillable jobs. It enables companies to find loyal employees who can maximize productivity and profits. Wiping out the U.S. program, as Trump and his far-right adviser Stephen Miller seem intent on doing, is not only counter-productive. It's reckless.