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Trump presidency could hamper refugee nonprofit group's plans

Dan Holtmeyer

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The next president could limit or completely block the nonprofit group Canopy Northwest Arkansas' plans to help about 100 refugees from around the world resettle in the area next year, though group participants said they're nonetheless determined to continue supporting refugees and other immigrants.

"This has become bigger than just a service organization. There's really kind of the makings of a movement here," said Emily Linn, Canopy's resettlement director, pointing to dozens of residents who have signed on to volunteer and the group's relationships with area schools, law enforcement, employers and others. "There's still work to do, and we would just want to capitalize on the momentum that we have."

Those fleeing violence and political or religious persecution have become a global concern in recent years as the world's nations contend with more than 20 million refugees in camps, resettled in host countries or on the move, according to the United Nations.

President-elect Donald Trump throughout his campaign has said he would curtail the flow of refugees and other groups to the United States out of concern their numbers could be infiltrated by terrorists and other criminals. He and other elected officials pointed to attacks like the one in Paris a year ago, which killed 130 and was carried out by European Union citizens linked to the Islamic State terror group in Syria and Iraq.

Trump has alternately said he wanted to bar Muslims or refugees from terrorism-prone areas.

"I'm putting people on notice that are coming here from Syria as part of this mass migration, that if I win, they're going back," Trump said in New Hampshire late last year.

Trump's statements were in sharp contrast with actions of the Obama administration, which earlier this year announced it reached its goal of admitting 10,000 refugees specifically from Syria last fiscal year. The U.S. has taken in about 70,000 total refugees in each of the past three fiscal years, mostly from African and Asian countries, according to the U.S. State Department's online total.

The chances of being killed by a refugee in the U.S. are remote: one in 3.6 billion, the conservative-leaning Cato Institute reported in September. Americans are about 21,000 times more likely to be killed by lightning strike or 5 million times more likely to die in a pedestrian accident, according to the National Safety Council.

The president has "fairly complete" power over how many refugees can come and from where, said Stephen Legomsky, a law professor emeritus at Washington University in St. Louis and former counsel for the federal immigration and homeland security agencies.

Federal law requires the president to consult with Congress on refugee policy, "but ultimately it is his decision and his decision alone," Legomsky said. "And every year they've said we'll take this many from this region, this many from this region."

The country has taken at least 20,000 refugees or so per year for at least the past four decades, but Trump could conceivably shut the door completely if he wished, Legomsky said.

Besides refugees, he president also may bar any immigrant group deemed "detrimental to the interests of the United States," though Legomsky said a president hasn't used that power against an entire religion such as Islam. Doing so would raise constitutional questions over the document's religious freedom guarantees, he said.

Third District Rep. Steve Womack, R-Rogers, and two other Arkansas congressmen last month wrote to Secretary of State John Kerry to voice concern over the vetting process for refugees, during which the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other agencies screen refugee applicants for any known criminal or terror links and often takes years.

The congressmen pointed to FBI Director James Comey's statements to Congress that while the process is thorough, agencies don't have information on everyone. "There's no risk-free process," he said.

Womack's spokeswoman last week said he couldn't support any system that can't "thoroughly and accurately vet refugees."

"While I cannot speak for President-elect Trump, Congressman Womack is hopeful that (Trump) will work with the FBI and the State Department to ensure the vetting process is air tight before refugees enter the United States," spokeswoman Claire Burghoff wrote in an email.

Canopy in the past several months joined with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, one of several national groups that work with the federal government to help refugees find housing, get jobs, enroll children in school and otherwise become accustomed to running a household in the U.S. Northwest Arkansas this fall became one of the Lutheran service's almost 50 resettlement sites around the country, said Nina Zelic, the service's director of refugee services.

"We're excited because Arkansans are excited. They've been just so welcoming," Zelic said, adding it's been several years since a resettlement site was last added. Canopy's plans to help 100 people would dwarf the dozen or so refugees sent to Arkansas last year, according to the State Department.

The service has also seen an uptick of volunteers at all of its sites despite some officials' seeing refugees as a risk, Zelic said.

"We certainly have found it to be an opportunity to engage at all different levels and continue this outreach," she said. "It's a long tradition that America has of welcoming the stranger, and we hope to see a continuing commitment to upholding those values."

The mood was optimistic at an evening volunteer orientation Canopy held earlier this month. At least 100 people crammed into a room at Fayetteville's Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, the pastor of which, Clint Schneklath, is chairman of Canopy's board. The helpers ranged from teenaged to gray-haired, including many with children, and they got a rundown on the refugee process and what kinds of help Canopy will need.

Ahmed Ali, a doctoral student at the University of Arkansas from Iraq, said he hoped to help with translation and driving refugees to their appointments, for example. Lauren Snodgrass, one of several members of the Bentonville Church of the Nazarene who attended, said she grew up in western Africa and hopes to translate for French-speaking refugees.

Snodgrass said she had been searching for a way to help with the world's troubles when she came across Canopy. She wasn't discouraged by the view of refugees as potentially dangerous, saying refugees would still need help regardless of the political climate.

"It makes me realize that instead of being passively in agreement with refugee resettlement, maybe I need to make my voice heard in an educated and loving way," Snodgrass said. "Hospitality is such a part of who I am. I think my parents taught me that."

Canopy's work continues even before Trump is sworn in as president in January, said Linn, the resettlement director. Two families -- one fleeing two decades of war in central Africa, the other coming from Iraq -- will arrive in Northwest Arkansas before the end of the year, she said. Teams of co-sponsor volunteers from Canopy will greet them at the airport and help them adjust for several months.

"We ultimately are just hoping for the best, I suppose," Linn said, echoing Zelic's point about the country's long history of refugee acceptance. "It would be really sad to see such a great tradition just stopped altogether."