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Roanoke finds itself at the center of national Syrian refugee debate

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Virginia lawmakers continue to explore ways to pause the arrival of Syrian refugees though it remains uncertain what fruit those efforts will bear.

Decisions about refugee admissions ultimately lie with the federal government. Even withdrawing the state's administrative support for resettlement, as some propose, could prove futile as nonprofit groups can be called on to fill that role — an approach already used in about a dozen states.

Del. Greg Habeeb, one of the lawmakers working up a bill on the issue, said the General Assembly still has options that are “certainly more than symbolic but certainly less than people would like it to be.”

Habeeb, R-Salem, concurred there is little the state can do if federal authorities are determined to forge ahead with the program over local objections.

“But for them to take that approach would be disappointing,” he said, adding federal authorities should work with states rather than bulldoze over them.

The tumultuous state-by-state debate over Syrian refugees hinges on fears terrorists could exploit the program to get into the country.

The unease was sharpened by concerns, still under investigation, that one of the Paris assailants entered Europe that way.

Roanoke Mayor David Bowers catapulted the region into the heart of the national discussion last week when he urged Roanoke Valley governments and “nongovernmental agencies” to suspend Syrian refugee aid and favorably compared the situation to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. He apologized Friday for the reference to internment but stood by his stance on Syrian refugees.

Federal authorities draw a distinction between the U.S. program — which can vet refugees before they arrive — and the more porous European borders.

The U.S. screening process is an extensive review that takes up to two years to complete, Anne Richard, assistant secretary for the bureau of refugees and migration, said during a House subcommittee hearing Thursday.

“Applicants to the U.S. refugee admissions program are currently subject to the highest level of security checks of any category of traveler to the United States,” she said.

The screening process includes fingerprinting, in-person interviews and background checks that involve the National Counterterrorism and FBI Terrorist Screening centers and federal Homeland Security, State and Defense departments.

Syrian refugees are subject to classified enhanced screening measures. Most refugees also must pass a pre-screening by the United Nations, which recommends cases for consideration. The U.N. typically refers less than 1 percent of cases a year.

At the same time, federal officials acknowledge refugee admission isn’t without risk. In hearings last month, high-level U.S. security officials said it can be harder to verify information from war-ravaged Syria.

“My concern there is that there are certain gaps I don’t want to talk about publicly in the data available to us,” said FBI Director James Comey.

Supporters frequently turn to the program’s strong track record. Since 2001, more than 859,000 refugees have been admitted, according to the Cato Institute.

Of those, three have been convicted of supporting terrorist activity, Cato said. None of the convictions involved Syrian refugees or plans for a domestic attack.

Federal authorities say the screenings are significantly better now than when those cases occurred. But that is cold comfort to those moving to hit pause on the acceptance of Syrian refugees.

In a floor speech Thursday, U.S. Rep. Bob Goodlatte, R-Roanoke County, said even one example of a terrorist exploiting an immigration program is too many.

The U.S. House approved a bill last week that would halt Syrian and Iraqi refugee admissions unless the heads of key national security agencies can certify the newcomers aren’t a security threat.

The bill passed easily with a bipartisan, veto-proof majority. But Senate Democratic leaders have vowed to oppose it.

U.S. Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., said the cumbersome refugee approval process isn’t the most viable path for potential attackers. Congress would do better to look at other avenues like a visa waiver program that allows millions of Europeans to enter the country annually with far less scrutiny.

“The idea that a terrorist is going to wait two years versus buying a ticket from Europe tomorrow, I mean,” the senator said Friday during a stop in Roanoke.

A member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Warner said he and others are working on a bill to require heightened reviews of visa waiver applicants who’ve journeyed to Syria or Iraq within the past five years.

“You want to talk about how we protect Americans? That is a legitimate issue,” he said of the push to tighten the waiver program. “If there are ways to strengthen the screening on refugees, I’m all for it. But these decisions need to be driven by intelligence and law enforcement.”

Warner added the nation can’t let fear lead it to abandon its values.

“The French didn’t go into a cocoon,” he said. “They said the best thing we can do to fight terrorism is to stand up for our way of life.”

The House has promised more refugee policy bills are on the way. Goodlatte — who’s working on the issue as House Judiciary Committee chairman — said last week’s vote was an important first step that should put the president’s administration on notice.

Habeeb, one of several Virginia Republicans pursuing the issue in Richmond, was encouraged by the federal bill and said it could be enough to allay his concerns if it passes and leads to meaningful reforms.

Habeeb stressed the concern in Virginia is focused on the integrity of the security vetting process. The latest proposal circulating among legislators is evolving to include all countries deemed to be state sponsors of terrorism rather than singling out Syria.

The proposal is still in the early stages, and more information on the refugee resettlement process is being sought. The new General Assembly session doesn’t convene until January.

Virginia may be in the midst of a de facto moratorium as no Syrian refugees are in the pipeline now to come to the state, according to the governor’s office.

The state and nation have taken relatively few refugees from Syria since a civil war broke out there and sent an estimated 4 million fleeing to other countries.

But as the crisis abroad worsened, President Barack Obama announced plans to accept 10,000 Syrian refugees in the coming year.

In the federal fiscal year that just ended, the U.S. admitted 1,682 Syrian refugees, according to State Department data.

Of those, 13 were placed in Virginia, accounting for slightly less than 1 percent of all refugees resettled in the commonwealth during that time.

The state helps coordinate support services in cooperation with nonprofit organizations such as Commonwealth Catholic Charities, and it administers federally funded benefits for refugees. No

state general fund money goes into the resettlement program, according to the Department of Social Services, which administers the program through its Office of Newcomer Services.

Brian Coy, spokesman for Gov. Terry McAuliffe, said the state has no authority to block refugee resettlement and might lose what little input it has if it withdraws as program administrator.