

Reynolds Consents To Further Refugee Resettlement But Questions Program, While Advocates Defend It

By KATE PAYNE · DEC 24, 2019

The Trump administration is requiring states and counties to formally consent before the federal government will resettle refugees in their areas. Gov. Kim Reynolds says Iowa will continue accepting refugees.

John Pemble / IPR file

Gov. Kim Reynolds [has agreed to keep resettling refugees](#) in the state, [while also questioning the security record of the program](#), without evidence. Under a [Trump administration executive order](#), states and counties have to give formal consent for the federal government to resettle refugees in their area, a move that some supporters say gives local officials a greater say in the process.

Refugee advocates are thanking Reynolds and some county officials for signing on to letters to the federal government, formally consenting to continued refugee resettlement in their area. The move is in response to an executive order issued on September 26th, which changes past policy to put the onus on both state and county officials to actively agree to refugee resettlement in their communities.

Advocates worry that if county and state officials didn't sign off on the practice, refugees would receive less support with housing, job placement and language and cultural training. Without those support services, some advocates were concerned refugees would leave their communities.

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"If they were to leave, it would be catastrophic for our town," said [Maria Gomez, the vice president of the Columbus Junction School Board](#) in Louisa County.

Gomez says there are [hundreds of refugees in her community of about 1,900](#), who have helped start businesses and a church, and who she says work hard and pay their taxes. She says she cannot imagine her community without them.

"I don't what it would be for our school district if those kids were no longer here," Gomez said. "They're doing everything in their power to be a good, great citizen. And they're just contributing in many, many ways."

Iowa advocates say the executive order would not bar refugees from certain parts of the country as some initially feared it might. They say refugees would still have freedom of movement in the country and would still be able to move to communities that didn't formally consent to the refugee resettlement program, but they would not be able to access the federal government's support services in those places.

In a letter co-signed with the governors of Nebraska and South Dakota, Reynolds praised the Trump administration policy that gives local governments more latitude in withholding support from refugees, and suggested Americans have lost confidence in the program's lengthy vetting process.

[Refugees face more exhaustive screenings than many other immigrants](#), a [process that can take two years](#) and includes multiple background checks, biometric testing and fingerprinting, as well as in-person interviews with federal officers, before a refugee is settled in the United States.

"Thanks to your leadership, Americans can be confident once again in the screening process for refugees entering the United States," the three governors wrote in their joint letter addressed to President Trump. "We applaud the recent steps taken by the White House and State Department at your direction to strengthen vetting of refugees. This provides much-needed assurance about the program's integrity to the communities welcoming refugees in our states."

Reynolds' office did not reply to requests for evidence of mismanagement by or formal complaints against the refugee resettlement program.

Lemi Tilahun works with refugees in Cedar Rapids and says there are situations where local officials would like to have a greater say in how refugee resettlement is administered, but he said he knew of no accounts of mismanagement or a failure of the vetting process. He says the governors' language in their letter runs the risk of casting fear and doubt on the process.

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"[The governors' letter is] casting this doubt or this fear that we don't know about the vetting process. I think the danger that we run into, that it could isolate or alienate folks that are new to the community because of the perception that's out there. And it really goes to feed the wrong perception." - Lemi Tilahun, refugee advocate in Cedar Rapids

Besides the executive order, the Trump administration has taken steps to drastically cut what's referred to as the refugee cap: the number of people admitted to the country each year. That cap is [now set at 18,000 for next year](#), the lowest level in the history of the modern refugee program, and down from 110,000, the level set during the last year of the Obama administration.

Earlier this year, [CNN reported](#) the country admitted no new refugees in the month of October.

[Quartz reported](#) it was the first month on record that the U.S. had resettled no new refugees.

This, at a time when [the United Nations calculates](#) there are more displaced people globally than at any time in modern history, including in the wake of World War II.

Tilahun, like other refugee advocates, points out that [refugees can help revitalize communities in Iowa](#) that have [struggled to hold on to their native-born population](#), and are a boon to

employers desperate for workers at a time when [Iowa's unemployment rate](#) is among the lowest in the country and many jobs go unfilled.

“The receiving communities...they're gaining productive people that are readily and available to be able to utilize their wealth of experience. And on the other side, we're also helping vulnerable populations,” he said.

Tilahun says if Iowans knew more about the plight of refugees, about the violence and deprivation they were fleeing, and the years or decades they may have spent stranded in refugee camps, they would be more open to welcoming them into the state.

Many Iowans do pride themselves on a legacy of being welcoming to refugees, dating back to [the leadership of then-Gov. Robert Ray](#) in welcoming Tai-Dam people fleeing Vietnam in the 1970s. [Ray's actions helped make Iowa a national leader](#) in resettlement, at a time when Congress had not yet established the federal refugee resettlement program.

Kerri True-Funk with the Des Moines field office of the [U.S. Committee on Refugees and Immigrants](#) says the state still has a reputation for being welcoming, but she says there is always more work to be done.

“The ideals and beliefs that Iowa is a welcoming place for refugees is still there, but that's being hindered by federal level policies,” she said. “I would like to see some of the leadership on the federal level continue to make the whole country a welcoming place.”

So far, in addition to the state-level authorization, the boards of supervisors in Dallas, Johnson, Linn, Louisa and Polk counties have signed formal letters of consent for refugee resettlement. Advocates say those counties account for many of the major resettlement areas in the state, but they're planning to lobby more counties as well.

Sara Zejnic works with refugees at the [Catherine McAuley Center](#) in Cedar Rapids. She says the restrictions put in place by the Trump administration have posed a barrier, but are also an opportunity to educate more people about refugees and their experiences.

“One of the unintended consequences is we've, in the resettlement world, have seen an outpouring of love and support,” she said. “Having refugee resettlement in the news more has kind of opened more peoples' eyes to communities or people living within their communities that they may not have realized were there.”

SAMPLE LETTER



KIM REYNOLDS
GOVERNOR

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

ADAM GREGG
LT GOVERNOR

December 10 , 2019

Secretary Michael R. Pompeo
U.S. Department of State
2201 C. Street NW
Washington DC, 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

This letter is in reference to Executive Order 13888, "*On Enhancing State and Local Involvement in Resettlement.*"

As Governor of Iowa, I consent to initial refugee resettlement in Iowa per the terms of the Executive Order.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kim Reynolds".

Kim Reynolds
Governor of Iowa

CC: Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Carol T. O'Connell
Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration
U.S. Department of State

SAMPLE LETTER

Rock Island County...Build the future and improve the quality of life for our community

Secretary Michael R. Pompeo
U.S. Department of State
2201 C. Street NW
Washington, D.C 20230

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Richard H. "Quijas" Brunk

Vice Chairman
Brian Vyncke

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Administration Staff

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Jessica Hall

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1/21/2020

RE: Executive Order 13888, Refugee Resettlement

Honorable Secretary Pompeo:

This letter is in reference to Executive Order 13888, On Enhancing State and Local Involvement in Resettlement, which was issued on September 26, 2019.

...That process shall provide that, if either a state or locality has not provided consent to receive refugees under the program, then refugees should not be resettled within that state or locality.

As the Chairman of the Rock Island County Board, I fully support refugee resettlement in Rock Island County. Furthermore, the County Board of Rock Island County, by official board action, has authorized this letter in support of refugee resettlement in our county.

Taking into consideration, among other things:

1. The United States has very strict refugee vetting, involving personal interviews, multiple background checks, biometric screenings, medical checks, with the process taking as long as two years, involving the Department of State, Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security, FBI, and the National Counter Terrorism Center.
2. Refugees have a positive economic and cultural impact on our communities.
 - a. Refugees pay \$21,000 more in taxes than they receive in benefits on average in their first 20 years in the U.S.
 - b. Refugee rates of entrepreneurship (15%) exceed other immigrants (11.5%) as well as U.S. born (9%).
 - c. Refugees become citizens at a higher rate than non-refugee immigrants. In 2015, 84% of eligible refugees were naturalized citizens, as compared to 51% of other immigrants.
 - d. Refugee children do as well as U.S. born children on measures of educational attainment.
 - e. Over 77% of refugees are of working age, as compared to 49.7% of the U.S. born population, helping to meet U.S. labor force needs.

**Source: The New American Economy's Report From Struggle to Resilience, the Economic Impact of Refugees in America, and the National Bureau of Research's report: The Economic and Social Outcomes of Refugees in the U.S.*

In January of 1989, President Ronald Reagan spoke these words, reminding us of how essential those coming to America from other countries are to our nation's success.

"We lead the world because, unique among nations, we draw our people, our strength, from every country and every corner of the world. And by doing so we continuously renew and enrich our nation. While other countries cling to the stale past, here in America we breathe life into dreams, we create the future and the world follows us into tomorrow.

Thanks to each wave of new arrivals to this land of opportunity, we're a nation forever young, forever bursting with energy and new ideas, and always on the cutting edge, always leading the world to the next frontier. This quality is vital to our future as a nation. If we ever close the door to new Americans, our leadership in the world would soon be lost."

Again, for many reasons, we support refugee resettlement in Rock Island County.

Regards,

Richard H. "Quijas" Brunk
County Board Chairman

CC: Principal Deputy Secretary Carol T. O'Connell
Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration
U.S. Department of State