

RST Statement by Russell Smith on FY2021 Refugee Ceiling  
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By Russell A. Smith, LMSW

Refugee Services of Texas joins with its fellow Texans in expressing outrage and dismay at the Trump Administration's record-low refugee resettlement ceiling set for FY 2021.

Without consulting Congress as federal law mandates, the Trump Administration announced a historic low of 15,000 refugees – far below the average of 95,000 achieved since the program's inception – further eroding the United States' proud history of safely and effectively resettling the world's most vulnerable people.

Flouting one of the nation's few successful bipartisan traditions, the Trump Administration has once again demonstrated a lack of understanding of the purpose and benefits of the U.S. refugee resettlement program, its critical role in driving economic growth, its positive effects on international relations, and its reflection of our shared American values of providing opportunity and freedom for all.

Meanwhile, the world is witnessing record highs of displaced persons—79.5 million people are displaced worldwide—most of whom are women and children who have been waiting years in temporary refugee camps to restart their lives in safety.

The minuscule refugee ceiling set for FY 2021 demonstrates profound disregard for the pressing needs of our world, a dereliction of duty in fulfilling our nation's obligations to vulnerable people we have pledged to help, and an inability to leverage the overwhelming resources at our disposal to take in tens of thousands more than this target goal will allow.

Resettlement goals have steadily dropped without explanation – from 45,000 in 2018 to 30,000 in 2019 to 18,000 in 2020. This leaves many of our community partners, including volunteers, churches and other faith-based groups, and business owners looking for talent, wondering where all the new arrivals are.

Texas has consistently been among the top resettlement states in America, resettling over 88,000 people from 2002 to 2019. This year, Refugee Services of Texas welcomed just 788 refugees and SIVs (Special Immigrant Visa) across its five locations in Texas (Amarillo, Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, and Houston), the lowest number we've ever resettled. Yet, this accounts for 3.8% of refugees and SIVs settled across the country. That means RST resettled 1 out of

every 26 individuals, our highest ratio ever. Texas is willing and able to resettle many, many more.

Perhaps most troubling is the fact that the number of actual arrivals has not been meeting the target goal, and we expect the same to happen this year. The target for FY 2020 was set at 18,000, but only 11,750 refugees were allowed to enter the country. Slow-downs are being implemented across the resettlement program that have not been explained or fixed by the Trump Administration.

We have seen that legislators and the American public often disagree on important issues, but refugees have enjoyed remarkable bipartisan support and will continue to do so. Since 1980 and the passing of the Refugee Act, we as a nation have resettled over 3 million people, and our nation's security abroad and our economic and cultural success at home cannot be overstated because of our nation's foresight and commitment to people in serious need.

The voices of refugees have been drowned out amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the presidential election, but we cannot let that continue. Resettled refugees continue to battle on the front lines of the virus as doctors and nurses, they contribute to the health and well-being of our communities, they invigorate our economy as entrepreneurs and job creators. Their voices must be heard.

Refugee Services of Texas implores the Trump Administration to take immediate action to rectify this situation by restoring the resettlement program and bringing the nation's target goal back to the historic norm of at least 95,000 refugees for FY 2021.

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