

Human Rights First

Discrimination, Detention, and Deportation: Immigration & Refugees

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Public Facing Advocacy Writing

KELLY MCEVERS, HOST:

Refugee advocates are worried about the things Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has been saying, especially in these days after the Orlando shooting. The man who committed the attack was actually born in New York, but Trump keeps talking about refugees. Here he is in New Hampshire on Monday.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

DONALD TRUMP: We have to stop the tremendous flow of Syrian refugees into the United States. We don't know who they are. They have no documentation, and we don't know what they're planning.

MCEVERS: What he calls a tremendous flow others describe as a trickle compared to others countries. We're going to hear about some the actual numbers and how the U.S. vets refugees. Here's NPR's Michele Kelemen.

MICHELE KELEMEN, BYLINE: President Obama set a goal to take in by this October 10,000 Syrians fleeing a devastating civil war. The latest State Department report says just over 2,800 have come, and activists say despite a slow start, the Obama administration could reach its goal. Still, Mark Hetfield, who runs HIAS, which helps to resettle refugees, says that's not much given the crisis in Syria.

MARK HETFIELD: The U.N. high commissioner of refugees estimates a million Syrians need resettlement. Canada, which is a country with one-tenth of our population, accepted 26,000 over the course of four months. So the U.S. response has been quite modest, to say the least.

KELEMEN: And the process is slow, adds says Eleanor Acer of Human Rights First. She says refugees go through more security checks than any other traveler to the U.S. That's particularly true for refugees from Middle East war zones.

ELEANOR ACER: We actually know a lot about Syrian refugees before they are brought to the U.S. through our resettlement process.

KELEMEN: They provide documents, their family histories and go through security interviews and other checks. And the ones who are admitted tend to be the most vulnerable.

ACER: They have been victims of the Syrian regime. Some of them are victims of ISIL terror. Others are just families who were targeted because of their background by the regime, people who refuse to serve the regime were also targeted and tortured.

KELEMEN: Acer says the U.S. has a long history of providing people refuge from political and religious persecution. The Refugee Act of 1980 set up the program that brings in about 70,000 refugees a year from all over the world, a figure that fluctuates depending on the needs. And the needs are vast for Syria. Millions of people have fled the country and are being hosted by Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon or in Europe. That makes the U.S. offer of 10,000 spots look small in comparison.

Democrat Hillary Clinton has suggested increasing the number of Syrian refugees coming here to 65,000. Trump wants to put the program on hold. Hetfield of HIAS says he misses the bipartisan days.

HETFIELD: I've been in this business for 27 years now, and for almost all of my career, we had as many Republican champions as we had Democratic champions. And that has totally changed.

KELEMEN: And he believes that's because of misinformation on the campaign trail and misplaced fears that terrorists can sneak in among refugees even though they're carefully screened and helped by groups like his to get settled into life in the U.S. Michele Kelemen, NPR News, Washington.

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