

## How Should Americans Address the Need for Refuge for Distressed People Locally and Nationally?

Recent events have raised the issue of America's willingness to help people in desperate straits. Locally, the efforts of a Georgetown nonprofit to create a shelter for victims of sex trafficking raised resistance from potential neighbors. Nationally, a dozen governors have signaled opposition to the Federal Government's plan to resettle Middle Eastern refugees, mainly Syrian nationals, in the United States.

Clearly the needs of people seeking refuge from violence, abuse, and economic hardship raise the question about our nation's willingness to continue to welcome distressed people into our communities and our country. Nonetheless, many Americans today are expressing their resistance to providing safe sanctuary to victims of violence and refugee resettlement. In some cases concerns are expressed about the location of resettlement - "not in my backyard"- and in some cases it's a genuine fear about security, particularly in the face of terrorist attacks against the U.S. and other European countries. Currently, we have both local and national debates about how conflicting humanitarian and security concerns can be balanced or reconciled.

Freedom Ranch: In October, The Key 2 Free, a nonprofit founded by six Georgetown women, announced plans to create a refuge for American victims of sex trafficking in the Northlake neighborhood of northwestern Georgetown. The refuge would provide transitional living arrangements for nine women while the victims were reintegrated into normal life. Neighbors objected to the project on several grounds: the proposal violated neighborhood restrictions on the type of structures proposed; the facility was a business rather than a home and could depress property values; the possibility that the refuge would attract undesirables seeking to retaliate against the residents. To go forward as planned, the project will require variances from the landowners association. At present the likelihood of such variances is uncertain.

This situation may at first seem an obvious case of NIMBY. As one Northlake resident put it "Wonderful cause, totally wrong place." However, the facts are mixed. The nonprofit purchased the land for Freedom Ranch without prior discussion with the landowners association and without confirming that the proposed structures (manufactured housing) were prohibited by the development's restrictions. The nonprofit has indicated that they will instead build permanent structures, but this has not addressed all the concerns raised by neighbors. The critical remaining concern appears to be the definition of the ranch as a home or a business. Even if one believed that the proposed project is a business, would a refuge facility that otherwise conformed to neighborhood building restrictions really seem as out of place as, for example, a retail store?

Refugees: Since the Paris terror attack, the issue of accepting Middle Eastern Muslim refugees, especially from Syria, has taken center stage in US political discussions. This reaction may seem at odds with the longstanding American tradition of accepting displaced persons. Our nation has a long (if sometimes spotty) history of providing refuge for those in need, whatever their origins.

The crux of the current debate is maintaining national security while welcoming refugees. It also involves the constitutionality of prohibiting people of a particular religious from entering the US, concerns about widespread xenophobia among our citizens, and a movement away from our nation's long-standing humanitarian, social, and political values.

Following the Paris attacks, 31 governors indicated that their states would refuse to accept refugees from Syria. All legal scholars who have been consulted have judged these refusals illegal and refugee settlement has continued, even in states where the governors have opposed it. In Texas, a family of six has been settled close by relatives near Dallas and a couple and four daughters have been placed in Houston. Another nine Syrian refugees are expected in Houston soon.

Unlike in Europe and the Middle East, the arrival of Syrian refugees in this country is less a flood than a trickle. Some 4.2 million Syrians have been displaced by the civil war; the United States has taken in a bit more than 2,200 of them. Only 24 families have been resettled in Texas.

One concern in this debate centers on the process that potential refugees must go through prior to being accepted for immigration. Potential refugees must first pass screening by the UN High Commissioner to confirm that they satisfy the definition of a refugee. Refugees recommended by the UN for resettlement must pass a rigorous screening process by US officials that can take up to two years to complete. This link provides a brief description of the process: [Refugee Screening](#). Despite the apparent thoroughness of this process, many fear that it is not thorough enough. However, as many commentators have noted, the refugee process is probably the most difficult way to enter the US: [Refugees and Visas](#).

The dominant argument against accepting Syrian refugees seems to be that we are allowing potential terrorists into the US. Fears about the entry of terrorists within the refugee population we may welcome into our country have led to proposals from members of Congress and from Presidential candidates that range from more stringent vetting of all people seeking entry into the U.S. to denying entry to all Muslims. However, since 2011, most of those accepted into the resettlement program have overwhelmingly been women and children and no known terrorists have entered our country as refugees. This webpage provides a few facts about Syrian refugees: [Facts about Syrian Refugees](#)

The political counter argument for denying refuge to Syrians and others displaced by war in the Middle East has been made in a letter from former government officials supporting accepting those refugees. Basically, the letter argues that we are playing into the Islamic State's propaganda by refusing sanctuary to Muslim refugees, indicating that the US is at war with Islam. The letter's signatories include security experts ranging from the Nixon administration to the Obama administration—four Secretaries of Defense, three Secretaries of State, six national Security Advisors, two directors of Homeland security, four Joint Chiefs of Staff and three directors of the CIA: [Letter from National Security Experts on Refugees](#)

These are challenging questions: Once distressed people are identified, how do we provide assistance and at the same time protect our rights and security? How do we measure the risks and determine if they are acceptable?