



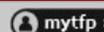
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published Friday, February 10th, 2012



U.S. State Department official seeks to soothe concerns over refugees

by Perla Trevizo
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A top U.S. State Department official, who spent two days in Tennessee discussing the state's refugee resettlement program, said he wants to give communities a "louder voice in the process."

"We believe it's in the best interest of the United States that we pursue this program, but also we need to recognize the community nature of the program," David Robinson, acting assistant secretary of the Bureau of Population, Refugees, Migration, said during a news conference Thursday.

Robinson has been in the state for a two-day visit with community members, local government officials and employers to discuss the resettlement process.

The problem, Robinson said, is not about refugees but from people lumping refugees and immigrants -- who often are associated with illegal immigration -- in the same group. Refugees are a very distinct subgroup of migrants, those who have a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group and are brought here legally, he said.

"These are people we reached out to, people we identified as in need of a solution," he said.

Tennessee is the first and only state to pass a law that mandates resettlement agencies to report quarterly to local governments and allows local communities to apply for a "moratorium" on refugee resettlement if those agencies overload local resources.

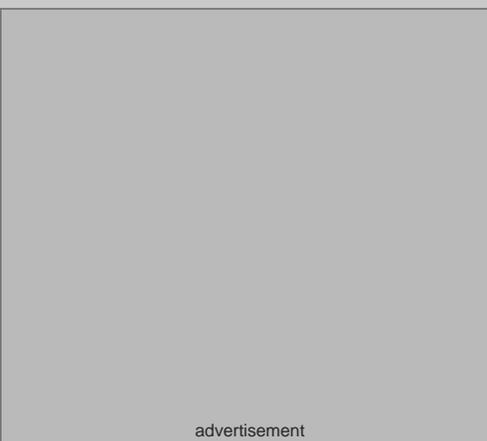
The law was approved last year, but the Tennessee Office for Refugees said no one has applied for the moratorium.

Robinson said that it's already part of federal law but said Tennessee's law "makes perfect sense."

He added, "We believe that's what we've always done," he said.

"It is difficult for anybody to leave their country of birth and establish a new home in the U.S.," said Eben Cathey, spokesman for Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition. "New laws should encourage communication between refugee groups and settlement agencies, and the towns that receive them, but not create a hostile environment for refugee families who have come to Tennessee to escape persecution, find honest work and begin rebuilding their lives."

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Chattanooga Times

Every year about 100,000 refugees are resettled in other countries, with the United States taking the largest share. This year, about 50,000 refugees from around the world will come to communities across the nation, including Chattanooga.

Since 2001, the local refugee resettlement agency Bridge Refugee Services has helped resettle more than 500 people from about 20 countries including Burundi, Cuba and Iraq.

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about Perla Trevizo...

Perla Trevizo joined the Chattanooga Times Free Press in 2007 and covers immigration/diversity issues and higher education. She holds a master's degree in newswire journalism from Universidad Rey Juan Carlos in Madrid, Spain, and a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Texas. She was selected as an International Reporting Fellow by the International Center for Journalists and in 2009 received an honorable mention for her story "Families Broken Apart" from the Tennessee ...

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