

Government halts green cards for refugees and asylees

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



The federal government has spent the past four months tapering off travel, statuses and paperwork for immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and some of the latest changes have Catholic groups across Arkansas eager to do more to support the most vulnerable.

As of March 25, the federal government has paused the permanent residency process for certain migrants, refugees and asylees who applied for green card status in recent years.

The decision followed President Donald Trump's Jan. 20 executive order suspending the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and the termination of the cooperative agreement by the U.S. Department of State with several refugee resettlement agencies, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Feb. 26.

Matthew Phillips, an immigration specialist with Catholic Immigration Services in Little Rock, told *Arkansas Catholic* that the government's decision has had an impact on the clients he serves.

"As part of the current administration's ongoing fight against legal immigration, it has indefinitely halted the adjudication of green cards for refugees and asylees," he said. "On Inauguration Day, an executive order halted all new refugee arrivals to the United States. The order was immediately litigated, and a preliminary injunction was granted on Feb. 25, requiring the government to continue admitting refugees.

“The next day, the Department of State sent out termination notices to the main agencies responsible for refugee resettlement, including the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, so that agencies could no longer receive refugees. Now, all refugee and asylee applications to adjust status to legal permanent residents (green card holders) have been indefinitely paused under the guise of ‘additional screening and vetting to identify potential fraud, public safety or national security concerns.’

“In truth, refugee and asylum statuses have always been subject to the most scrutiny of any immigration process. They must undergo thorough background checks and interviews prior to approval and must continue to show good moral character while in the United States or risk deportation.”

Phillips said all of this puts refugees and asylees at greater risk than before.

“Refugees and asylees may continue to file applications for adjustment of status; in fact, refugees are legally obligated to submit the application after one year’s presence in the United States. Unfortunately, they may have to wait for years to receive their green cards,” he said.

“This puts many people on precarious ground, because both refugee and asylum status only remain valid as long as the government maintains that there is a finding of credible fear preventing a return to the country of origin, whereas green cards may be renewed continuously as long as the immigrant does nothing that would warrant in a loss of status. Also, since only legal permanent residents may become citizens, all refugees and asylees have been blocked indefinitely from ever becoming citizens.”

Refugee Basira Faizy escaped Afghanistan with her family when the Taliban attacked in August of 2021. Faizy settled in Arkansas, resuming schooling at UA Little Rock and learning English as a second language. She was hired by CCA to help other refugees just like her do the same. Now, she’s worried about what this means for her and her community.

“These changes have created a lot of confusion and concern in our community. Many refugees we serve at Catholic Charities of Arkansas are unsure about their future. The idea of freezing statuses and eliminating green cards makes the path to citizenship feel more uncertain and out of reach for them. It’s causing stress, especially for families who have been working toward stability and permanent residency,” she told *Arkansas Catholic*.

She said CCA is spending more time educating clients about their rights.

“From my perspective, this impacts both our work and our clients deeply. We now spend more time helping people understand what these changes mean, and many are fearful of what will happen next. It’s emotionally and mentally taxing for them, especially for those who have already faced so much trauma,” Faizy said. “Personally, as someone from a refugee background, I can relate to their worries. It’s hard to focus on rebuilding your life when your legal status feels fragile. There’s a lot of anxiety around whether they’ll be able to stay long-term or ever become citizens.”

Another organization worried about the government’s decision is Pax Christi Little Rock. It has discussed with Catholic schools in the diocese that are concerned about the implications of the recent rulings affecting parochial school students. Additionally, the organization sponsored families of Afghan refugees four years ago — families that worked with the American government in Afghanistan. Dr. Sherry Simon, a founding member of Pax Christi Little Rock

and chair of Pax Christi USA National Council, said she is afraid that if those families are sent back to Afghanistan, they will be targeted by the Taliban for their cooperation with the U.S. government. The organization has also spent the last few months preparing double-sided “Know Your Rights” cards in English and Spanish.

“We did sponsor an Afghan family for a year in sponsorship with Catholic Charities, and Christ the King Church was also a part of that sponsorship,” she said. “After a year, they went back to live with their family in Muncie, Ind. ... but what I’m aware of from that family is that we certainly heard a lot of stories from them while they were here about their fears of ever returning to Afghanistan because of the Taliban, because of that government — if people who had assisted the U.S. military there were ever returned, they would be imprisoned or killed. That was the family’s fear. ... They’re in a quandary. They don’t know what that means. They know that their families can’t join them ... Some of the funds that these families were getting for support are also frozen ... and they have great fears that they could potentially be sent back, despite promises made under the Biden Administration, despite this being something that was done to help them because they’d spent years helping the American military in Afghanistan.

“The only thing that I know to do is continue doing everything you can. Pray. Contact your representatives, folks in Congress as well as the Senate, and to detail the specifics as to what this means and how this reflects a huge shift in our values, from helping our allies to betraying them.”

Jennifer Verkamp-Ruthven, director of Catholic Immigration Services, said the halt to green cards for refugees is “one of the saddest things to come out since the inauguration.”

“Those that are refugees or aslyees have status. First of all, it’s a lawful, legal status, giving certain protections, and the only way you can become a refugee or aslyee is through a very long process of proving that you have a well-founded fear of being persecuted,” she said.

“When the inauguration first happened and everyone was fearful, those were the people to whom we were confidently able to say, ‘Don’t worry. You’re fine. You’ve got status and maybe you already have a pending application for your green card or you’re about to.’ And now we can’t say that with confidence. These people are already some of the most vulnerable. They’ve fled their countries for a reason, often because their lives are at risk.”

“Our specialists that are working on these applications, they’ll continue to work on them,” Verkamp-Ruthven said.

Dennis Lee, executive director of Catholic Charities of Arkansas, said, “Bishop (Anthony B.) Taylor has asked us to be ‘Christ for others’ in the way we relate to our brothers and sisters who are living in fear under the current immigration policies and practices of the new administration. The staff at Catholic Charities of Arkansas are dealing with a lot of people in difficult circumstances, and as best we can, we are providing our services with an openness to God using us, in the words of Bishop Taylor, to be ‘a source of love, love that banishes fear, love that brings hope and healing ...’”