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60-plus refugees bound for Mich. face closed borders

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Thousands of protesters spilled onto the streets outside and inside Detroit Metro Airport on Sunday night, railing against President Donald Trump's travel ban with homemade signs and chants.

(Photo: Virginia Lozano, The Detroit News)

More than six dozen Michigan-bound Muslim refugees had their plans abruptly canceled Friday when President Donald Trump signed his controversial travel ban, according to local resettlement organizations.

A handful of Christian refugees remain cleared for travel.

Samaritas had more than five dozen refugees' plans disrupted, the resettlement agency said.

"They had all their clearances; they had their plane tickets," Samaritas spokeswoman Lynne Golodner said of the Muslim immigrants now denied entry to the United States. "They've all been canceled."

Formerly known as Lutheran Social Services of Michigan, Samaritas contracts with the state to help refugee resettlements. It handles the most cases in Michigan and is the fourth-largest resettlement organization in the country, according to Golodner.

A total of 59 people from Iraq and Syria were scheduled to arrive in Metro Detroit over the next few weeks, according to Samaritas. They already were cleared and approved for entry into the United States.

Of those 59 would-be travelers, 26 were expected this week, 20 next week and 13 the week after, Golodner said.

"And after Friday, there were others scheduled to come to west Michigan," she said. "I do not have numbers but they've also been canceled."

None of those refugees are among the 872 being granted "hardship" waivers to enter the U.S., according to Golodner.

A similar story was found in Lansing, where travel was canceled for 16 refugee families that were expected to arrive to Michigan this week to receive services through St. Vincent Catholic Charities, said Judi Harris, director of refugee services. They were to arrive from countries including Sudan, Iraq and Congo, she said.

Harris said the local families of those whose travel plans were canceled were distraught and concerned.

"They're in terrible conditions and they need to come here," Harris said. "I don't know who would qualify as a hardship when all of our clients are in severe hardship. Refugee camps are not safe places for the most part."

Their travel plans were blocked Friday when Trump issued an executive order suspending all refugee admissions for 120 days and barring immigration for 90 days from citizens of Muslim-majority countries with terrorism concerns: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. The order indefinitely bars the processing of refugees from Syria.

"We were not surprised; we knew that this was coming," Golodner said of the order. "Historically, whenever there's a change in administration, there's usually an adjustment to refugee resettlement. Never before to this extent, but we usually have shifts."

Six Christian refugees traveling through Samaritas were not affected by the ban, thanks to exceptions for religious persecution of those practicing a religion that makes them a minority in their homeland. Those half-dozen immigrants, from Myanmar and Congo, are bound for west Michigan communities this week.

“Because there’s a large Christian community (in west Michigan) and the churches over there are so opening to refugees, we resettle a lot of persecuted Christians there,” Golodner said.

National partners, including Episcopal Migration Ministries and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, contact Samaritas when incoming refugees are deemed best suited for Michigan resettlement, Golodner said. Samaritas then meets immigrants at the airport, arranges housing and assists with employment, education and other needs. Most immigrants become “self-sufficient” within 180 days of arrival.

Samaritas would not support policy favoring one religion over another, according to Golodner.

“From a humanitarian perspective, we are concerned whenever a particular faith or race is targeted. It’s always concerning,” she said. “Today, it’s Muslims, in years past it was Jews or African-Americans, and who knows who it will be tomorrow. We want to see a world where what you believe, or how you pray, or what you look like really doesn’t matter.”

The sudden ban prompted a logistical nightmare for dozens of refugees who already were cleared for take-off.

“I don’t know if people understand that stars have to align for refugees to make it here,” Golodner said. “Once they receive asylum, they have to go through so many different steps, and they have expiration dates for when they have to complete each step. If one of your clearances doesn’t make it by the expiration date, you have to go back to square one.”

Harris also noted the difficulty the delayed refugees will face in the future.

“They’ve been through medical clearance and security clearances,” Harris said. “They’ll have to start all over again. It’s not guaranteed they’ll get a flight in June. They’ll have to do lot of work to get that flight again.”

Refugees now blocked by Trump’s 120-day ban likely will have to restart the process when the ban is lifted, she said.

Despite Samaritas’ concerns, its clients already in the United States largely remain hopeful that their loved ones will eventually make it to American soil.

“We’ve had clients concerned about the safety of their family waiting to come, but they remain optimistic about our current administration, way more than most American citizens,” Golodner

said. "It really struck me while speaking with some of the clients how optimistic and loyal to America they are, despite being potential targets of this order. It really says a lot."

hfournier@detroitnews.com

(313) 223-4616

Twitter: @HollyPFournier

Staff Writer Candice Williams contributed to this report.