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POLITICS

What has happened to refugees blocked from coming to NY by Trump order? What we know



Chris McKenna

New York State Team

Published 3:01 a.m. ET March 5, 2025 | Updated 6:21 a.m. ET March 5, 2025

The extended family of seven from Afghanistan had finally been vetted and approved to come to the U.S. as refugees after living in exile in Pakistan for two years.

They had fled their homes for their safety and were set to start new lives in New York, joining a family member who already had settled in Westchester County. They even had plane tickets, scheduled to bring them into New York City on two flights on Feb. 4 and 19.

But their plans dissolved with the stroke of a pen on Jan. 20.

On his first day in office, President Donald Trump signed an order suspending a 45-year-old program that created a legal immigration path for refugees from danger spots around the globe. That and later administration actions have thrown into limbo the fates of thousands who had been cleared to come to the U.S. and were set to travel when the abrupt policy shift in Washington upended their plans.

Among the stranded are Afghans and Iraqis who face retaliation for working with the U.S. military and were granted special immigrant visas. They aren't covered by the halted refugee program and can still enter the U.S. But the administration has stopped paying for their travel and resettlement in the U.S. and canceled contracts with agencies that help them.

How NY nonprofits are helping those stranded overseas

A network of aid groups across New York are scrambling to bring over those with special immigrant visas, known as SIV holders. On Feb. 21, a family of seven from Afghanistan landed in Rochester due to those efforts. Their tickets were bought by two Westchester

groups — Open Arms for Refugees and Neighbors for Refugees — and they were taken in by a Rochester group called Keeping Our Promise.

But no such path is open for others approved by the halted U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. They are barred from coming unless the administration grants case-by-case exemptions or complies with a Feb. 25 court ruling that blocked Trump's Jan. 20 order. So far it has not.

That's the predicament for the Afghan family of seven that was set to come to Westchester in February.

The three generations in their group include a father and son who worked for U.S. agencies and humanitarian groups like Catholic Relief Services during the 20-year American occupation that ended in 2021. At risk of retribution by Afghanistan's ruling Taliban, they sold all their possessions and have been living off the dwindling proceeds in Pakistan, forbidden to work as they awaited refugee status.

"It was heartbreaking when the executive order was issued," recalled Jmel Wilson of Larchmont-based Neighbors for Refugees, which has been working to unite the family with another son who lives in Westchester.

"They have nothing," Wilson said. "And right now they don't even have the assurance that we're going to keep our promise to bring them over."

Afghan refugee: She fled the chaos in Afghanistan when U.S. troops left. Now she's thriving in Westchester

Different paths to U.S. for refugees, SIV holders

Another Afghan family's plans to come to Westchester have also been put on indefinite hold.

Muhammed, a family member who settled there in 2023, has been working with Westchester-based Hearts and Homes for Refugees to bring over his sister and her family, who have been living in Pakistan since the Taliban takeover in 2021. They had finished the extensive vetting process for refugees and were nearly set to travel when Trump stopped the program.

"We were hoping they would be here by February or March," Muhammed told the USA Today Network in a phone interview, asking that his last name be withheld for fear of

retribution. "But after the executive order, everything just stopped."

Now they are in a bind. His sister and her husband fled to Pakistan largely for their safety, but they also know their 4-year-old son with cerebral palsy wouldn't get proper medical treatment in Taliban-run Afghanistan. And with their travel plans to the U.S. in limbo, they face possible expulsion from Pakistan, which has begun deporting Afghan refugees.

Having a special immigrant visa made the difference for the family that flew to Rochester last month.

The couple with five kids, ages 2 to 13, were put in an apartment and then a house by the nonprofit Keeping Our Promise. Majid, the father, said in an interview that he had been granted a visa because he worked as a security guard at the U.S. embassy in Kabul. He and his family had been living with other refugees at a U.S. military base in Qatar while awaiting approval to come to the U.S.

Majid, speaking by phone to the USA Today Network through an interpreter, also asked that his last name be withheld because of potential retaliation against relatives still in Afghanistan.

Not migrants: Condemning the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program is not the answer for migrants | Opinion

Rescuing Majid and his family was one victory for Keeping Our Promise and the two Westchester groups that paid for the trip. But Ellen Smith, executive director of Keeping Our Promise, worries about the fate of many others who have been left stranded by the new administration's actions.

"What's going to happen to these people?" Smith asked. "What's going to happen if they don't have a flight to the U.S.? This whole thing is crazy. I don't understand how you can treat people this way who served the United States. It makes no sense."

What comes next for the refugee program and resettlements?

How many were stranded? Religious-based groups that sued to challenge Trump's order say in court papers that 20,287 refugees and SIV holders had been approved for resettlement and were set to travel to the U.S. as of January. Many thousands more were seeking approval and were in earlier stages of the application process, attorneys for the groups said.

A federal judge in Seattle issued a preliminary injunction on Feb. 25 that put Trump's order on hold while the case plays out. Theoretically, that should restart the refugee program. But the administration is appealing the decision, and it's unclear if it intends to comply — or even if the staff and funding needed for resettlements is still in place.

The Department of State didn't respond to a question about when it would resume the program.

Shawn VanDiver, founder and president of the group #AfghanEvac, explained the uncertain status for SIV holders in a recent video on social media: "While SIV processing is still happening, the support services that enable that shot at the American dream are not. Privately funded groups are trying to help with that."

In another video update, VanDiver said, "As of now, there's been a permanent stop to all resettlement services here in the United States. We hope that will change. We hope Congress will step up and take action."

Chris McKenna covers government and politics for The Journal News and USA Today Network. Reach him at cmckenna@gannett.com.