

Beat: Travel

SYRIAN REFUGEE ISSUE-U.S. SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS RESPOND TO THE PRESS

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USPA NEWS - Was held, on November 17, 2015, a Special Briefing with the Office of the Spokesperson, via Teleconference,. The concern was mainly about Syrian Refugees Screening and Admissions inside the United States of America. The transcription was given by the U.S. Department of State. It was in presence...

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OPERATOR: First question comes from the line of Andrea Mitchell of NBC. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. Can you respond directly to claims by Republican candidates, by the speaker of the House today, who said that everything was going to put on hold and wants a task force to look into allegations that people are not screened, that there is no vetting, that intelligence information is not properly assessed, and that people could get through the filter threatening the homeland? I know you've given the data, but could you drill down a little bit more on the intelligence aspects of this and how you would know when people are coming from areas without papers who they really are, aside from their own self-assessments? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Okay. This is Speaker Number One. We have a very good relationship with members of Congress who work year in and year out on our program. We "" our bureau and the overall program of providing assistance to refugees overseas and resettling refugees in the United States has had a tradition of bipartisan support and good funding levels from Congress. And so I think a lot of the questions we're getting right now "" and we'll be up on the Hill today and tomorrow and Thursday responding to a lot of question "" I think a lot of questions we're getting are from members who are just learning about the program for the first time.

And I also think there's a lot of misinformation out there on the blogosphere, because I find that I'm correcting a lot of false information that has been passed to them from people who are unfamiliar with the program "" things like the idea that the United Nations selects who comes to the United States. It's not true. You've just heard about the whole process that we run that is quite intensive, involves several U.S. Government agencies, and it also involves nongovernmental organizations and faith-based groups.

So we are very interested in correcting these misimpressions describing our program. The way we are talking about it with you all today, we're going to be doing that on the Hill. And we have always done this, but I would say our conversations about this and the number of hearings that have been planned or held have picked up since the beginning of September, as the public has gotten a lot more seized with the issue after the drowning of "" the tragic drowning of Aylan Kurdi.

So we see this renewed interest as an opportunity to educate a lot of people about how we've actually been managing the program and that we manage it in a way that is well done and is up to the toughest standards in terms of a humane program, a lifesaving program, but also one that has very strong security features built in.

Can I pass off to Speaker Two on the intelligence piece of this ?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO: Sure. I guess what I would say in terms of "" as Speaker Three has explained, there is intelligence on refugee populations, including Syrian refugees. And so we try to make sure we have the best relationships with the

intelligence community, and again, on an ongoing basis so that the work that we do is being informed by the work that they do in terms of looking at risk profiles with things that are going on in a particular geographical area, et cetera.

I mean, there's been also, I know, quite a bit of talk about whether refugees have or don't have documents. We really "" our experience worldwide covers the gamut. There are refugee populations who have very minimal documents. Maybe people have been living in refugee camps for generations, or people who fled in a way that they "" they "" their documents were destroyed or they were stolen or taken from them as they travel.

I would say in contrast to that, Iraqis and Syrians tend to be a very, very heavily documented population. And members of families tend to have passports and family registries and military books, and they have a lot of information in most instances. And people who are interviewing them from their first time they register with UNHCR, going through the administrative form-filling process and then coming for their refugee interview, are pretty familiar with the kinds of documents that various populations have, and are pretty sophisticated about what they should see, and if something's missing, why is it missing. That would be a line of questioning.

So if someone told us while the family was off at work, a barrel "" I'm sorry, a barrel bomb fell on the house and their documents were destroyed, that could be a credible reason for not having one's documents. But we would follow up on that and talk about where they lived and when this incident happened. And again, we can check that with known country conditions information to see if that is a consistent explanation for having "" for being missing certain documents that an applicant would otherwise ordinarily be expected to have.

MODERATOR: Great. I think we can move on to the next question now.

OPERATOR: Okay, thank you. Next question is from the line of Brad Klapper of Associated Press. Please go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. I had a couple questions. One, what is your refusal rate ? How many have you denied resettlement "" percentage or total ? And then going back the biometrics, when you have biometric information and you "" from a European, for example, you can share that either with law enforcement or intelligence agencies in those countries. You don't have that with the Syrians and you don't have a real intelligence presence on the ground either. So how do you even test criminal history among Syrians ? Thanks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO: Sure. Let me talk about the first part of your question first, in terms of what our acceptance and approval rates are. Right now, our approval rate is a little over 50 percent, but the other half of that "" the other 50 percent includes both denials and cases that are still pending. And so a number of those cases that are still pending may ripen into approvals, and in fact, we expect that that approval rate will edge up a bit above the 50 percent. But that's where we are right now.

As you know, we haven't "" for us, in terms of interviewing these applicants, it's relatively new for us to be seeing large numbers. And there are some cases that post "" after the interview, come back to headquarters for another round of review, and so some of those cases don't have a final decision yet at this point.

In terms of criminal history, we do the best we can with the resources that we have. Some of the international "" there are some collections that have that kind of information. We talk to people about what their previous criminal histories are and we hear about that. But it's "" so I'd say that's pretty much where we are, unless "" I think Official Number Three might want to flesh that out a bit.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL THREE: Yeah, I think that's accurate. I want to be clear here that each element of the process is not the totality of the process. So the "" whether it's the IC checks, whether it's criminal history, whether it's the interview "" all these things have to be synthesized and taken in the aggregate to make a decision. So I think that collectively, the process, through the lengthy period that these adjudications take, help reveal some of these issues as these applicants move through the process. So I think in the fullness of time for these cases, these things can be discerned and can be surfaced.

And for refugees, given that period of time, there is oftentimes the opportunity to flesh out these things in a fairly good way given the constraints that we have.

MODERATOR: Great. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Okay, thank you. Next question from Todd Spangler, Detroit Free Press. Please go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks for having the call. I'm just curious "" yesterday a lot of the news was governors saying they would not accept Syrian refugees. I just hope you could talk a little bit about what roles governors or their administrations play or don't play "" maybe more importantly "" in this process. Thanks.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Sure. This is Speaker One again. So this is a federal program carried out under the authority of federal law, and refugees arriving in the U.S. are protected by the Constitution and federal law. And they are required to apply to adjust their status to become a legal permanent resident within one year of arriving in the United States. So he or she is also free to move anywhere in the country, although we set up that some of the state benefits they get may be available to the refugee only in the state that they're originally resettled to.

So while state and local governments have an important consultative role to play in the resettlement of refugees, the resettlement program is, as you're hearing, administered by the federal government.

The other piece of this, though, is that this is a program that is very much dependent on the support of local communities. So across the United States we are resettling refugees in 180 locations and it's from coast to coast, it's nearly every state, and it's using nine networks of not-for-profit organizations, six of which are faith-based.

So a lot of people are involved through their community associations, through their churches, in providing assistance "" from picking refugees up at the airport when they first arrive, taking them to their homes, finding those homes. Volunteers contribute furniture to furnish their first apartment, providing school equipment, things that kids need to start in school, and helping the able-bodied adults find a job. And so this has incredible quiet support from coast to coast because so many Americans are involved in ways big and small to make this program successful.

So we don't want to send refugees anywhere where they would not be welcomed, and we find that refugees are welcomed almost everywhere in the United States. And an important part of this program for these nine groups that carry it out is that they consult routinely with local authorities, with school superintendents, with the mayor, with the police chief, with the local newspaper, so that people who are in positions of authority know that refugees are being resettled, know sort of what the expectations for the program are, that the local health centers know that Congolese refugees may be coming in and that some of them will have been victims of rape.

Right now we would want to be alerting people that some of the children coming from Syria might have been traumatized by things they've seen. And the amazing part of it is, even though this is carried out by so many people across the United States, this is a very successful program. Year in and year out, refugees prove to be among the most resilient, hardworking people in the United States.

.....TO BE CONTINUED WITH 'FINAL PART - U.S SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS RESPOND TO THE PRESS'

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