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Michigan's delay on Syrian refugees spurs debate



The decision to suspend moving Syrian refugees into Michigan is drawing mixed reactions from Metro Detroiters, opening up debate on the region's role as a haven for Mideast immigrants.

When Jihad Alharash visits newly resettled Syrian families that his volunteer group works with, he's reluctant to mention now how others from that region in the world now will face a harder time reaching Michigan or the United States.

"What happened in Paris and France is such a crime. Nobody can even say a word. I mean all of our hearts are broken ... but do you blame these poor families who are coming from Syria, do you just close your doors against them?" said Alharash, a doctor involved with

the Syrian American Medical Society and newly formed Syrian American Rescue Network.

“Do you know these families are fleeing away from the terrorists that took over their country?”

Hamtramck Mayor Karen Majewski, whose city is known for welcoming immigrants, said she supports Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder’s move.

“Certainly there are concerns that refugees need to be screened and the stories verified. We also understand how hard that it is to do,” she said Monday. “Whatever process the federal government and our governor decides to institute, we will in Hamtramck, as we always have, welcome folks who are looking for a better life.”

Others feared overreach that could change how Michigan welcomes immigrants and refugees in its diverse communities.

“The governor’s remarks are hasty in the absence of a conclusion to any investigation into the attacks on Paris, especially considering the robust and lengthy screening procedures for Syrian refugees already in place by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security,” Dearborn-based ACCESS said in a statement Monday.

“While we share the governor’s concern for making the safety and security of Michigan communities an utmost priority, we ask that the governor not discard the values of diversity and inclusion that make our state great. We urge the governor to consider the implications of equating desperate refugee families with the terrorists they are fleeing from, and recommit to making Michigan a welcoming state for all.”

Dawud Walid, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations’ Michigan chapter, called Snyder’s rollback “a knee-jerk reaction.”

“The Department of Homeland Security already has robust measures of doing background checks for refugees,” he said. “... It may not appear to be overtly biased but it is implicitly based upon a biased

premise.”

He also wondered how connecting refugees’ status to Muslim extremism abroad could tilt sentiment in Metro Detroit.

“There’s a fear of backlash that’s very real in the community right now,” Walid said, adding he had “been informed of a couple situations in which Muslim women wearing hijab were yelled at in their cars and there were attempts to run them off the road.”

Haifa Fakhouri, president, CEO and founder of the Arab American and Chaldean Council, points out that the refugees her group helps already endure lengthy checks. Some of those vetted include doctors, engineers and other professionals, she said.

“We are very careful about the process and people who are coming here. I know our Homeland Security and the government has screened them thoroughly enough before they entered. ... We are for screening to make sure we are safe and nobody will hide behind the refugee (status) to come to the United States.”