

Refugee resettlement suspension leaves advocates, families in limbo

World Relief Wisconsin has resettled 2,000 refugees across the state, but new executive action from the federal government threatens their future and the clients they help.

By John Ernst
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Fleeing civil war in Sudan, Deng Lual spent nine years in a refugee camp in northwest Kenya. He's one of the thousands of Lost Boys of Sudan, young refugees who fled the war-torn African nation throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

In 2001, Lual resettled in Houston, Texas, with the help of the Greater Houston YMCA. He became a United States citizen six years later and today is a caseworker with World Relief in Wisconsin helping refugees like himself resettle into their new homes.

But on April 15, Lual will be out of a job after an executive order from President Donald Trump earlier this year suspended the U.S. Refugee Admissions program, cutting funding for Lual's nonprofit.

World Relief is a global Christian humanitarian organization. It has operated out of Appleton, Wisconsin, since 2012, resettling more than 2,000 refugees across the state. Now, it is scrambling under Trump's order.

"The biggest, most abrupt change is that with the reception and placement program being paused, we have no arrivals coming," World Relief Wisconsin's Regional Director Gail Cornelius told *The Daily Cardinal*. Federal funding has also been halted, forcing the organization to remodel their funding to more private sources and make difficult staffing decisions, according to Cornelius.

Those difficult staffing decisions include furloughing caseworkers like Lual.

On Jan. 31, just weeks after Trump's inauguration, Lual and a few other WRW employees were furloughed but were brought back by the county government, according to WRW's Access Benefits and Connections Manager Marlo Fischer. Fischer, who was laid off alongside Lual, said they were hired back on an eight-week contract to help families who had been resettled in the fall.

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- Marlo Fischer
WRW Access Benefits and Connection Manager

But those layoffs sparked uncertainty among refugees who were seemingly deserted by their caseworkers.

"When the case workers were saying their goodbyes at the end of January, the clients were like, 'What does that mean for me? How do I survive? You just brought me here to leave me,'" Fischer said. "There were just



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so many emotions with the clients, but it was amazing to be able to walk back in a couple of weeks later and be like, 'okay, we're here.'"

Fischer and Lual's eight-week contract will expire on April 15, and they said more WRW employees will face



PHOTO OF MARLO FISCHER/COURTESY OF WORLD RELIEF

the same fate at the end of the month. In the meantime, Lual is preparing his clients for when his contract expires. As soon as he got back, he began meeting with families, focusing on familiarizing them with public transportation networks and connecting them to other community resources, like medical offices and FoodShare.

"A main priority is to give them [bus training] to show them where they can go," Lual said. "I can't be able to do everything for them when I'm gone, they'll have to figure it out themselves."

For caseworkers whose contracts will run out in April, emotions have elevated.

"[Lual] and I aren't here much

longer and it's been an amazing journey," she said. "I just wish I could stay."

'A lot of fear and uncertainty'

WRW has three offices across the state, recently opening in Eau Claire to complement their Appleton and Oshkosh locations. They've served Congolese, Afghan and Burmese refugees, and recently, refugees from Ukraine, Venezuela and Nicaragua.

In addition to acclimating refugees to basic parts of Wisconsin life, Cornelius noted the importance of building a support system into the framework of their new lives — employment, job interviews and transportation are frequent areas refugees are confronted with challenges that differ from what they might experience at their former home.

"Many of the folks and the families that we work with come here with a very high level of education, with a very long job history, with kids that have been enrolled in schools. It's not that they're doing it for the first time, it's that it's entirely different [from] any context that they've ever seen or experienced before," Cornelius said.

While WRW hasn't received any new refugees since Trump took office in January, there has been an influx of families they've worked with in the past coming back with questions about their future.

"There's just a lot of fear and uncertainty in the immigrant community right now, [and] people aren't sure what their status

means," Cornelius said. "We've had a lot more contact with the families that we haven't worked with a lot over the past year or two. Now they're coming back to us and saying, 'Are we safe here? Are we okay? Do we need to make a plan for leaving?'"

One of the hardest parts of functioning in this new environment, she said, is the lack of assurance Cornelius and her coworkers are able to provide to families they're working with.

"To feel like we're in an environment now where we can't really be experts anymore just because the ground is shifting under us so quickly, it's requiring us to be resourceful and creative," Cornelius said. "But it also changes the level of service or the level of knowledge that we're able to provide for clients and families."

One of the ways WRW is being creative is switching their funding to private sources. Funds have come from churches, foundations and other individuals, allowing the organization to continue to



PHOTO OF DENG LUAL/COURTESY OF WORLD RELIEF

function after federal funding was cut off. In a blog post the organization published in mid-February, they announced that they had received more than \$300,000 in donations since mid-January.

While many Wisconsin communities have volunteered with WRW and partnered with the organization, WRW has also met resistance, notably in Eau Claire last year. Billboards sprung up sporting misinformation about how the refugees — who were vetted and invited by the federal government — arrived in the country.

However, Cornelius said what people see on the news might not actually represent the wider view of those in the community.

"We've had more volunteers in Eau Claire than we have in any of our other sites. We have found our communities to be very welcoming," she said. "One of the great challenges that we have right now with immigration as a whole being so politicized is that people don't understand the refugee resettlement program. They don't necessarily understand who a refugee [is] and where [they are] coming from."

Before Lual was resettled in the U.S., he experienced a rigorous process including background checks, fingerprinting and interviewing. Lual had to wait nine years in Kenya, and he said he still has schoolmates at Kakuma Refugee Camp awaiting resettlement.

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- Gail Cornelius,
WRW Regional Director

"[Critics] don't understand that [refugees] are safe. They're not coming here to steal your jobs," Fischer said. "They're coming to literally save their families lives and hopefully start a new life here."

As a Christian organization, Cornelius noted the importance of "loving your neighbor." The best way for communities in Wisconsin to understand WRW's work is to interact with the families and get to know them, she said.

Cornelius hopes that Wisconsin communities will continue to understand the importance of WRW and the work they do, in addition to the benefits refugees can bring to a community, whether it be economic impact, workplace development or cultural difference.

"Just understanding the value is something we're emphasizing in this current climate and helping people to really see why this program has a positive impact and why welcoming refugees is not only a humanitarian response," she said. "It is also a benefit to the community to welcome these families."