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Pope Francis waves during the April 2 Easter Monday "Regina Coeli" prayer in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. (CNS/Reuters/Tony Gentile)



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The lawsuit names the departments of State and Health and Human Services as well as their respective secretaries, Marco Rubio and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Both departments have roles in delegating resettlement work to the bishops conference.

There was no immediate reply in court from those departments. An HHS spokesperson said the department does not comment on pending litigation.

The USCCB said it is still awaiting about \$13 million in reimbursements for expenses prior to Jan. 24.

As of Jan. 25, it said, there were 6,758 refugees assigned by the government to USCCB's care that had been in the country less than 90 days, the period of time for which they're eligible for resettlement aid.

The conference said suspending the resettlement effort will only prolong the time it takes for refugees to find employment and become self-sufficient.

President Donald Trump, whose first administration sharply cut refugee admissions, immediately suspended the decades-old program upon taking office again in January. He and his proxies have criticized refugee resettlement and other avenues of immigration.

Vice President JD Vance, a Catholic convert, [recently accused the bishops conference](#) for resettling "illegal immigrants" in order to get millions in federal funding — an apparent reference to the resettlement program, which involves legally approved refugees. The lawsuit noted that federal reimbursements don't cover the entire cost of the program and that in 2023 the conference paid \$4 million more than it received, while additional donors supported resettlement efforts by local Catholic Charities and other recipients.

Vance's criticisms drew rejoinders not only from U.S. bishops but an implicit rebuke from [Pope Francis](#), who said Christian charity requires helping those in need, not just those in one's closest circles.

Those who accompany the incarcerated have said there is a lot to do in ministering to a population that has committed crimes and had to live with the consequences of those actions.

This population of men and women often comes from backgrounds of drug use, multiple arrests and instability in employment and housing.

Yet, the work of Catholic prison ministry has been mostly carried out quietly. So much so, that it has long been thought of as something only priests and religious do. This has meant that lay involvement "is almost nonexistent," according to Karen Clifton, executive coordinator of the online-based Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition, or CMPC.

"A survey was sent out," she told OSV News. "And the problem was, we got a lot of responses that said we know somebody in our diocese is doing this work, but we just don't know who they are and what they're doing."

The survey went out to all the dioceses across the country after Pope Francis asked his U.S. nuncio about the state of prison ministry in this country. That was after his 2015 visit to a Philadelphia-based correctional center.

Clifton said the pope's inquiry came as several Catholic prison ministry and advocacy groups banded together in search of national guidance. Both events coincided to form the coalition in 2018, now made up of more than three dozen ministries across the country. The idea, said Clifton, is to have an active prison ministry in every diocese. CMPC was formally incorporated last year.

Bishop William A. Wack of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Florida, the coalition's episcopal adviser, told OSV News the coalition addresses three main concerns through online seminars and resources.

"To form people, to help to train would-be ministers, chaplains, and also to support those who are doing this ministry because, like a lot of ministry, it can be difficult," he said. "People are often isolated, who are doing it in their dioceses, and so we wanted to be that support and also (be) a place for formation. And to advocate for certain things that we need to do the ministry."

Philadelphia-based Augustinian Father Jeremy Hiers has participated "in a lot of (CMPC's) workshops." For more than 50 years, his province has been active in the ministry. Since 2021, he has gone to the state prison in Chester, just south of the city, to give the sacraments to inmates and celebrate weekly Mass in a rotation with his brother friars.

"(Catholic inmates) proactively put together the liturgy," he told OSV News. "They plan the music. They plan who's going to take part in the liturgy, the various roles from altar serving to reading, and so I think it's something that they very much count on happening every Sunday. And it's something that they make sure they invite one another to. So it's a real community."

Hiers also visits those at the infirmary who were not able to attend Mass. Then he spends two to three minutes with each man in the maximum-security wing.

Just north of Chester, the Augustinians also have a degree program at Phoenix state prison, where inmates can work toward an associate or bachelor degree in general studies from Villanova University.

Hiers said other orders do offer Bible study and spiritual resources at Chester. Still, many laypeople have told him they want to do the ministry, and he sees a role for them to fill the gap in accompaniment between Masses.

But, he said, "it's very easy to go inside if you're ordained. It's not as easy for people who are not ordained. â?| If I could be king for a day, that would be the first thing I would fix. I would make it much easier for laypersons to find a way to help."

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