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Refugees from El Salvador help distribute food during a Catholic Charities-hosted party marking World Refugee Day, June 20, 2019, at the agency's immigration services center in Amityville, New York. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops sued the second Trump administration Feb. 18 for its abrupt halt to funds for resettling refugees. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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A federal judge has denied a request from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to compel the Trump administration to reinstate its contracts with the conference and resume paying it for expenses for resettling refugees in the United States.

U.S. District Judge Trevor McFadden wrote that the federal courts lack the authority to order the government to honor its recently terminated contracts with the bishops' conference. The bishops are appealing the March 11 ruling.

"The relief the Conference seeks in its preliminary injunction — reinstatement of contracts terminated by the Government — is beyond the power of this Court," [McFadden wrote in his 16-page decision](#).

McFadden is a 2017 appointee of President Donald Trump and delivered [one of the first acquittals in the Jan. 6](#) prosecutions.



A protester holds up a sign Oct. 15, 2019, outside the U.S. Capitol in Washington against the first Trump administration's cuts in the number of refugees to be admitted under the U.S. resettlement program. The U.S. bishops Feb. 18 sued the second Trump administration for its abrupt halt to funds for resettling refugees. (OSV News/CNS/Bob Roller)

Attorneys for the bishops' conference [filed notice](#) on March 12 that they were appealing McFadden's ruling to the appeals court for the District of Columbia Circuit.

The bishops' refugee resettlement contracts with the federal government remain canceled for now and the conference will not be paid for its ongoing work of refugee resettlement. The conference said in court documents it is still owed about \$13 million in reimbursements from the federal government.

"While we do not agree with the Court's decision, we will continue to advocate for refugees," Chieko Noguchi, a spokesperson for the bishops' conference, told National Catholic Reporter in an email.

"We are reviewing our options to ensure that the newly arrived refugees and their families, who were assigned to our care by the State Department, are not deprived of assistance promised to them by the United States," Noguchi said.

McFadden's decision is a setback for the conference, which filed its [federal lawsuit](#) on Feb. 18, almost a month after the Trump administration ordered all foreign aid to be frozen during a 90-day review.

The ruling marked another victory from a judge appointed by Trump. McFadden also [sided with the Trump administration](#) last month when he denied an Associated Press request to allow AP journalists to immediately resume covering White House events and travel on Air Force One after being barred over [AP's refusal to change references to the Gulf of Mexico](#) in its stylebook.

The bishops' lawsuit says the Trump administration's pause on foreign aid harmed newly arrived refugees and was a blow to the conference, the largest nongovernmental program to resettle refugees legally in the United States. The conference aids refugees through its Migration and Refugee Services.



The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops building is seen in Washington May 8, 2017. The U.S. State Department has terminated its contract with the conference to legally resettle refugees, following a suspension of the arrangement in January 2025. (OSV News/Tyler Orsburn)

Nearly 7,000 refugees had been assigned by the government to the bishops' resettlement program, under two contracts, court records said, for the 2025 fiscal year that awarded the conference about \$65 million for initial resettlement expenses.

The bishops' conference received a letter on Jan. 24 from the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration notifying it that its refugee resettlement contracts were "immediately suspended" pending a review of foreign assistance programs.

A month later, the State Department notified the bishops' conference by letter that its refugee resettlement contracts were "immediately terminated" as of Feb. 27. The State Department's letter ordered the conference to "stop all work" on the program

and not to spend any more money on the program.

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In a subsequent filing on Feb. 27, attorneys for the bishops' conference wrote that the contracts' terminations violated several federal laws and that the funding suspension continued "to inflict irreparable harm."

[Fifty of the conference's staff members](#) — more than half its resettlement staff — have been laid off and more employees are at risk of losing their jobs, the bishops' lawsuit said.

"Refugees may lose access to shelter, food, urgent medical care, English-language learning, job-training, and other services during their first days in the country," [the bishops' attorneys wrote in a Feb. 19 memorandum](#).

Since 1980, the U.S. bishops conference has helped resettle more than 930,000 refugees under the government program.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. [View the full series](#).