

Don't shut the door on refugees

A conservative says Georgia's decision to reduce the number of refugees doesn't make sense

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Opinion

Creative Loafing Atlanta

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United Nations refugees arriving legally in the United States are facing strong, but quiet, opposition from some Georgia politicians.

Last week, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported that state officials working under Gov. Nathan Deal have been asking the federal government to substantially reduce the number of refugees they send to Georgia. Many of these refugees, some of whom are fleeing wars and violence, settle in metro Atlanta to start a new life.

The short message is "Refugees drain more resources than they add to Georgia, and, moreover, too much diversity is a drag on our cities, counties, and state."

I'm a full-time resettlement professional in Georgia, so you can assume I would disagree. But coming from someone who's labeled himself a "conservative, evangelical Christian," you may be surprised to hear my reasons why.

You might think that, as a free-market-oriented conservative, I'd make an argument about economics in favor of legal immigration. Maybe something about the fact that refugee resettlement is a net gain for the people of Georgia.

In my experience placing refugees into thousands of entry-level jobs in nearly 200 North Georgia companies during these past several years of brutal recession, I've seen firsthand that refugees don't "steal" jobs from anyone. Refugees are filling jobs that, more often than not, American citizens just will not consistently do. And those jobs need supervisors, which are filled by locals. It's a symbiotic market relationship.

But that's not why I want the privilege of welcoming refugees to my state.

You might think that as a conservative I'd be tripped up by "out-of-control" public spending to educate and provide health care for refugees in Georgia. But let's tone down the vitriol: Pointing the finger at U.N. refugees as one of



Dustin Chambers / CL File

A Burmese mother and daughter, helped to resettle by RRISA, pick out clothes at All Saints' Church's Threads program.

the causes of our budgetary woes is a straw-man tactic that overlooks the everyday governmental mismanagement, the news of which you can read about in any newspaper in town.

The \$16 million in federal funding that flows into Georgia to help pay for refugees to resettle more than covers the costs of caring for those refugees. At the same time, Georgia gets to enjoy the benefits of the labor these residents contribute to its economy. According to the Council of Refugee Serving Agencies, 28 percent of new Georgia businesses created last year were started by immigrants and refugees. In 2011, refugee service agencies spent more than \$2.1 million on local businesses in Clarkston alone. Additionally, over the past four years, refugee resettlement agencies have spent \$800,000 on MARTA.

Are the education, transportation and health care systems broken in Georgia? Yes! Let's have a conversation about fixing those problems, but not by suggesting that fewer people using a broken system represents a repair process, any more than putting an "out of order" sign on a couple of stalls constitutes the repair of a restroom.

Refugees arriving in 2013 have experienced cultural orientation training that our great-grandparents who arrived on Ellis Island — or even refugees 20 years ago — couldn't have fathomed, and the vast majority of them take it to heart. Those programs are improving exponentially every year, thanks to such organizations as Washington, D.C.'s Center for Applied Linguistics, which operates orientation programs in refugee camps abroad.

Refugees in my neighborhood are statistically less likely than the average neighbor (myself included) to wind up in trouble for criminal or domestic violence. And when they do, their community structures often provide accountability to get them back on track, rather than railroading them into the prison-industrial complex.

But that's not why I value my refugee neighbors.

As someone who grew up in a town of 2,000 people with one red light and four-digit phone numbers, you might assume that I would worry that immigrants bring down my property values and suck up resources with subsidized housing.

But fortunately, I know that at the several dozen complexes where our refugees are placed, not a single one of them is subsidized by the government. The average refugee who receives government assistance spends six months on welfare programs before finding employment, versus more than 4.5 years for the average Georgian. After the refugees' initial 90 days of support, they pay rent just like I did when I lived in the complex. That is, at least until I bought a house right next door.

Every year I have lived in the neighborhood, I have watched violent crime and drug trafficking become more rare, and gunfights break out less frequently. "Dumpsters" have been restored to the swimming pools they were built to be. And actual Dumpsters have stopped being annual depositories for tragic victims of violence.

That's not all because refugees are becoming more prevalent here; much of it is because others have moved to this community to serve and welcome refugees — and to be good neighbors to the rest of us Americans already here.

They help form neighborhood watches that overcome language barriers, call in activities that are gateways to criminal ones, and create more walkable neighborhoods by advocating for sidewalks and street lights rather than parking spaces and traffic lanes.

Do I like that most of my neighbors get around on foot instead of driving cars (and not because it's the hip and healthy thing to do)? Do I like that small, walkable businesses thrive in my community as a result? I guess so. But that's not why I wish more refugees came to live here.

No, the reason I, as a Georgia voter, want to continue to welcome more refugees to join my community is because it is good. Not just good for business, or the future, or America, but because it is righteous to welcome the foreigner and the alien as though they were one of our native-born. It is the right thing to do to help the vulnerable and needy get on their feet and begin contributing to society in a way that restores them to the dignity of self-sufficiency and useful vocation in this community.

Southern hospitality is one of many things that make Georgia great. I hope that my church friends and I will have the privilege of sharing that greatness with more refugees for many years to come.

<http://clatl.com/atlanta/dont-shut-the-door-on-refugees/Content?oid=7600836>. Accessed February 21, 2013.