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The child of a Venezuelan migrant peers from a tent at an encampment set up by migrants in a park near the main bus terminal in Bogotá, Colombia, June 3, 2020. Staff layoffs following the Trump administration's freeze on foreign aid in early 2025 have hit hardest so far in Colombia, where Jesuit Refugee Service assists Venezuelan refugees and others in accessing asylum to stay in that country. (AP/Fernando Vergara)



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Vital humanitarian activities that Jesuit Refugee Service leads in nine countries remain in jeopardy, the organization says, [even after a judge's order](#) to temporarily lift the Trump administration's freeze on foreign aid.

The United States office of JRS said it needs \$1.25 million to continue its most critical programs — including providing medicine, food, shelter and services for children with disabilities — during the three-month pause on all U.S. foreign assistance imposed by President Donald Trump.

A federal district judge ordered late last week for the funding freeze to pause temporarily and gave the White House until Feb. 18 to comply. Despite that order, JRS has not seen its funding resume, an agency official told National Catholic Reporter.

The potential funding loss for crucial aid to the world's refugee population is the latest fallout for Catholic organizations from Trump's efforts to dramatically reduce international assistance. His administration has justified the foreign aid freeze as necessary to eliminate fraud, waste and spending out of line with its priorities. The U.S. spends roughly \$40 billion on foreign assistance, or less than 1% of the total

federal budget.

JRS programs receiving State Department funding have been at a standstill since Jan. 24, when Trump's 90-day pause on all U.S. foreign assistance went into effect. That includes the life-saving humanitarian work it undertakes with refugee communities around the globe, the organization said.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio has indicated such programs would be exempt from the funding pause. Jesuit Refugee Service did not receive instructions on applying for a waiver until Feb. 10. It paused that application after the temporary restraining order was issued.

"It's been a confusing period," said Kelly Ryan, president of JRS USA and regional director of JRS North America.

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Already, 400 of Jesuit Refugee Service's 11,000 staff have been laid off. The organization anticipates the freeze to impact 104,529 refugees and displaced people who directly benefit from its programs, and more than 400,000 additional people who benefit indirectly — for instance, in cases where a service to a parent benefits or is shared with family members. A bulk of the affected programs provide medical and mental health services to displaced people and education for children forced to flee their homelands.

"It is devastating to these programs if they were stopped midstream," said Ryan, who previously worked in the U.S. State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. "It raises ethical and spiritual and really overall concerns about our ability to accompany refugees if we can't continue to do the work."

Ryan told NCR the suspension of foreign aid has already caused "considerable damage" and has thrown the future of U.S. assistance into uncertainty.

Also uncertain is whether the Trump administration will heed the district court's order to resume funding. It [previously ignored a judge's order](#) to release billions of dollars in federal grants.

"We are cautiously optimistic that existing assistance programs may be reinstated,"she said.

JRS USA is a chapter of Jesuit Refugee Service and was established initially to fundraise for programs overseas. One of its funding sources has been the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, which in 2024 provided 60% of Jesuit Refugee Service USA's budget. For fiscal year 2025, the bureau awarded it \$18 million.

Established in 1980 by the Society of Jesus under then-Superior General Fr. [Pedro Arrupe](#), Jesuit Refugee Service formed initially to assist hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese fleeing their country after the end of the Vietnam War.

Since then, it has continued to accompany and advocate for refugees and displaced people, now operating in 58 countries. In 2000, it became an official foundation of the Vatican City State. Jesuit Refugee Service's international office in Rome supports a network of regional and country offices, including JRS USA.



A sign from Jesuit Refugee Service is displayed during an ecumenical prayer vigil in Rome's Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere Feb. 6, 2024, as part of a week of raising awareness about human trafficking. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Jesuit Refugee Service relies on a variety of funding sources, including private donors and other European governments. In 2023, it received nearly \$46 million in government funding, or 42% of its total \$108.7 million income. In comparison, the Jesuits contributed \$19 million that year, followed by other religious orders (\$15 million), foundations (\$8 million) and households (\$7 million).

Funding from the U.S. State Department supports JRS programs in nine countries: Chad, Colombia, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, South Africa, South Sudan, Thailand and Uganda.

In many cases, assistance provided by nongovernmental organizations like Jesuit Refugee Service are critical lifelines for refugees, who, depending on the host country, can lack access to jobs, education or certain social services.

Staff layoffs have hit hardest so far in Colombia, where JRS assists Venezuelan refugees and others in accessing asylum to stay in that country. It's a program that Ryan says is consistent with the Trump administration's position for countries of first asylum offering protection.

"The idea of not having people take to irregular migration patterns, that's actually undermined by cutting that program," she said.

JRS says the aid freeze will be felt most in Chad, where it is the United Nations' designated lead for education in the country's 19 refugee camps. Jesuit Refugee Service estimates 32,000 people in the Western African nation — currently [hosting 1.3 million displaced people](#) — will be impacted directly by the U.S. pause in aid and another 129,000 will be indirectly affected.



Sudanese refugees displaced by the conflict in Sudan gather to receive food staples from aid agencies at the Metche Camp in eastern Chad March 5, 2024. Jesuit Refugee Service is the United Nations' designated lead for education in Chad's 19 refugee camps. (AP/Jsarh Ngarndey UIrish, File)

In Iraq, JRS staff are facing difficult questions of what is more life-saving, infant formula or psychiatric care to prevent suicide. Other staff and beneficiaries from its Thailand program expressed shock at the funding U.S. cutoff, in a video provided by JRS USA. They worry that, without the funds to cover rent, some refugees could become homeless.

"We need help. We need freedom. We are human beings like everyone else," a 15-year-old unaccompanied minor from Ethiopia said in the video.

Other JRS programs impacted by Trump's foreign aid freeze include:

- Assistance to Rohingya refugees in India and Thailand who fled persecution in Myanmar, including 300 children who received schooling through JRS;

- Medicine and medical services in Iraq;
- Housing and food costs for the severely ill or dying in South Africa;
- Health and social services, specifically for children with disabilities, in South Sudan;
- Medical support and cash for refugees in Uganda.

"These programs advance U.S. interests by advancing peace and security," Ryan said.

In the U.S., Jesuit Refugee Service provides services to refugees at shelters in El Paso, Texas, near the southern border. It does not resettle refugees in the country.

JRS has issued three "action alerts" urging its members and supporters to press Congress to intervene to lift the foreign aid freeze. Nearly 4,000 messages have been sent so far, a JRS official said.



Migrants seeking asylum in the U.S. stand outside the office of the Center for Integral Attention to Migrants in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, March 18, 2021.

(CNS/Reuters/Jose Luis Gonzalez)

Similar advocacy calls came from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Relief Services, which stands to [lose half of its roughly \\$1.5 billion budget](#) due to the Trump administration's gutting of the U.S. Agency for International Development or USAID. Fe y Alegría, a program of the Canadian Jesuits, also stands to lose a \$1.2 million USAID grant, Canadian Jesuits International [said](#).

CRS repeated the need for congressional outreach in meetings Feb. 6 with diocesan partners. It is not known how many have taken part in the advocacy campaign.

One diocesan CRS director, who spoke to NCR on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media, said "the situation is dire" for people who rely on the humanitarian aid that CRS provides.

"It's worse than you can imagine. I mean, these are programs that people rely on, that the poor rely on. We feed people on a daily basis, and when that disappears, they're no longer being fed. Once we stop feeding them, they're going to die. It's that blunt," said the director, who described the Trump administration's freeze on foreign aid to be "heartbreaking and mind-boggling."

Carolyn Woo, who served as president and CEO of Catholic Relief Services from 2012 to 2016, told NCR that she supports reforms to make government services more efficient, but cautioned that any changes have to be made with consideration for the impacts on vulnerable populations.

"The greatest tragedy is that we are making changes, but we are forgetting that we are dealing with people, and I think the first job of the government is to take care of people," Woo said.



Displaced people from the Yazidi religious minority are seen at the Sharya camp, in Dahuk, Iraq, Oct. 29, 2019. (CNS/Reuters/Ari Jalal)

Sen. [Tim Kaine](#), a Catholic Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told NCR in an email he has long supported the work of CRS.

"As a USAID contractor, CRS helps not only to address human suffering around the world, but in turn also helps to quell instability and thereby makes the United States safer," the Virginia senator said.

He called Trump's efforts to dismantle USAID "ill-advised and illegal, and I'm working on legislative solutions to expand congressional oversight of foreign assistance decision-making."

Asked about the potential CRS funding losses, Sen. James Risch, a Catholic Republican from Idaho and chair of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, told NCR: "There are certainly projects under USAID that are valuable for America's

security interests and standing around the world. I feel confident that the Trump administration will ensure that those programs remain a priority."

Risch said he supported the Trump administration's efforts to reform and restructure USAID and would work with Rubio in the process.

A CRS spokesperson this week declined NCR's request to interview president and CEO Sean Callahan, who [in a Feb. 3 staffwide email](#) said the organization had begun laying off employees and shutting down programs funded by USAID.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has also declined NCR's requests for comment.

Woo told NCR that she believes "now is the time for faith leaders to speak truth to power" and provide a public witness of the Gospel imperative to care for "the least of these."

"This is such a golden moment for our religious leaders, especially our Catholic bishops, to come out and speak on the Gospel," said Woo, who described the present situation as "a moment of challenge" and "a huge teaching moment" for the church.

Said Woo, "This is a time to unite the bishops, for them to say the most important tenet of our faith is that Jesus asks us to love, and to have the love to serve others."

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