After five years in Columbus, a local refugee resettlement group announced it is closing its doors because of a little-talked-about piece of President Donald Trump's executive order affecting refugees and immigrants.

World Relief Columbus will be shutting its doors in mid-July, even after cutting its staff by more than half, officials said. The two other local resettlement groups — Community Refugee & Immigration Services (CRIS) and US Together — also have laid off workers in anticipation of significant budget cuts.

That's because Trump's order cuts the number of refugees admitted this federal fiscal year from a planned 110,000 to 50,000. Because 30,000 refugees have already been resettled since Oct. 1, only 20,000 more can be resettled over the next seven months.

The nonprofit resettlement service agencies say they can't absorb such a drastic decrease, even if the numbers were to go back up again next year after new vetting procedures are put into place.

"It's crushing," said Kay Lipovsky, office director of World Relief Columbus. "I fear the entire refugee program is at risk."
Resettlement agencies help new refugees find housing, learn English, develop job skills, obtain medical care and acclimate to American culture. The general goal is for the new residents to be "self-sufficient" within eight months of their arrival.

Nationwide, the nine refugee resettlement groups, six of which are faith-based, are bracing for funding reductions and scrambling to raise money to try to lessen the pain, supporters say.

Catholic Charities USA, which is currently serving 45,000 refugees and immigrant families, for example, last week started an $8 million fundraising campaign to bridge any gap created by the refugee program's uncertain future. The group told The Associated Press that an estimated 700 of their 54,000 jobs throughout the country might be at risk because of Trump's executive order.

Another group, the International Rescue Committee, hopes to raise $5 million in what it says is its "first-ever emergency appeal" to help its 29 offices nationwide continue to support refugees already here in the United States.

Typically, the annual number of refugees that can be admitted into the United States and the allocation of these numbers by region are set by the president after consultation with Congress at the start of each fiscal year in October. But Trump chose to use an executive order just a week after he took office to reset the 110,000 figure for this year set by President Barack Obama.

The Trump administration argues that the ban, which also summarily denied entry to all refugees for 120 days and travelers from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen for 90 days, is needed to keep out Islamic State and Al-Qaeda fighters migrating from Middle East hot spots. Unlike the reduction in refugee numbers, those pieces are currently on hold because of a recent federal appeals court ruling.

While none of the refugee resettlement groups dispute the need to put safety first, they say the reduction in refugee numbers couldn't come at a worse time given circumstances elsewhere in the world and doesn't have to result in such severe action.
The number of people worldwide driven from their homes by war and persecution is at an all-time high, they say, so many resettlement agencies had increased their staffs after Obama boosted this year's numbers to 110,000.

The World Relief Columbus office is one of five of the agency's 25 resettlement offices being closed nationwide, officials said. The closures are necessary, they said, because the agency is expecting to go from serving about 11,000 refugees a year to between 5,000 and 7,000.

The Columbus office was selected because there are two other resettlement agencies in the area, not because of its performance, according to World Relief national officials. They said the Columbus staff has served with "diligence and sacrifice."

"Many have been with us since this office opened and they have ministered well, often in very difficult circumstances," World Relief President Scott Arbeiter and CEO Tim Breene wrote in a letter to the group's Columbus supporters.

Kay Lipovsky, director of World Relief's Columbus office, said she had cut her staff from nine to four people after Trump issued the order in anticipation of a budget shortfall, but she never expected to close. The office will continue receiving new refugee arrivals through the end of the week, she said, and will serve them through July 15. She is working with the two other resettlement agencies to make sure no one is left behind.

Angie Plummer, executive director of CRIS, which is associated with Church World Service, said she laid off nine workers at its Columbus office. Nadia Kasvin, director and co-founder of US Together, which is affiliated with Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, said she eliminated 6.5 positions here because of the anticipated cuts.

"It's just devastating," Plummer said. "The one silver lining to come from all of this is the tremendous support and good will we've seen from people in the community."

For example, CRIS is the beneficiary of a established by Victoria Beckman, who came to the United States from Columbia in 2001 to work as an engineer for General Motors. She is now a Columbus lawyer who specializes in transnational disputes and foreign law. Her goal is to raise $3,500.
A similar but larger fundraising effort — a goal of $25,000 — has been started for US Together at the ________________.

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