

## They cared for NJ's sick and elderly. Now they are facing deportation



[Hannan Adely](#)NorthJersey.com

11-14-25

A federal immigration crackdown is worsening New Jersey's health care labor crisis, forcing thousands of immigrant workers out of jobs, and putting the state's most vulnerable residents at risk.

Among the workers is a mother of three living in Metuchen who arrived from Haiti in January 2023. As a home health aide, she cared for the sick, including a paralyzed elderly woman who was her primary client for two years.

"I wash them, feed them, give them medicine, clean their sheets. I go with them if they have to do therapy at the hospital," she said, asking that her name be withheld because of a pending immigration case.

She is one of thousands of immigrants across New Jersey who have lost legal status, and, with it, their livelihoods. Since taking office, President Donald Trump and his administration have launched an aggressive campaign to detain and deport immigrants in the country illegally. At the same time, the administration has rolled back immigration programs that permitted hundreds of thousands of immigrants to live and work in the United States.

Business leaders say the shrinking of the immigrant workforce [has disrupted industries](#) from construction to hospitality — but the impact on health care has been especially dire.



Nearly 30% of New Jersey's health care workers were born outside the United States — well above the national average of 17%, according to the [Migration Policy Institute](#). Among home health aides, nursing assistants and personal care aides, that share rises to 41%.

The industry already grappled with labor shortages, well before Trump entered his second term with a sweeping agenda of mass deportation. The reasons are varied: too few workers, too many leaving the health care field and the growing demands of an aging population.

The immigration crackdown will worsen critical shortages, said Andy Cassagnol, executive vice president of the New Jersey region of 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East. The union represents more than 7,000 workers employed in 78 New Jersey nursing homes.

"To now be placed in a position where they could take a hit in their staff — upwards of one third of their staff in some cases — that could put them in the position of having to shut their doors," Cassagnol said.



### **'Hurting ourselves'**

Amid shortages, nursing assistants may have to take on more patients, said Cassagnol. He described a possible scenario.

"Imagine it's your family," he said. "That means if your family member is supposed to receive medication at a particular time, they won't. If they are supposed to be mobilized, meaning walked around a facility, they won't. Any services they would traditionally get, it's going to be affected based on how many people work there."

Employers are very much concerned, he said.

"Immigrants are a lifeline to them at a time when there is very short staffing in this industry. It's hard to not just attract workers to the field, but also to keep them and sustain them."

Caring for the elderly and disabled is emotionally and physically demanding work, often for low pay. These jobs have high turnover and are hard to fill, said 1199SEIU spokeswoman Rose Ryan. Longer hours and heavier caseloads also raise safety concerns.

“Ensuring that folks are working in a safe environment means making sure they have the resources they need to get that work done safely,” Ryan said. “Sometimes that resource is as simple as just having another body there right next to you.”

“Many who are 65 or older are moving to a nursing environment,” she said. “What we do now is going to have a profound effect. It just doesn’t make sense. We are hurting ourselves.”

### **Haitians hard hit**



Many Haitian immigrants work in New Jersey’s health care system — and they are among those hit hardest by recent policy changes.

About 530,000 immigrants lost status when a humanitarian parole program for people from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela was terminated in June — including 210,000 people from Haiti. The program grants temporary legal status to individuals or groups for urgent humanitarian reasons.

More than half a million Haitians are also slated to lose Temporary Protected Status — granted to citizens of countries deemed unsafe for return — when it expires on Feb. 3, 2026. TPS for Haiti had been renewed repeatedly since 2010, but the Trump Administration [sought to end the designation](#) even earlier than February, although the effort was blocked by a federal court judge.

The Metuchen mother's work authorization ended after the Trump administration [canceled parole for Haitians](#). Her three daughters — a college student, an aspiring nurse, and a fellow home health aide — also lost their status.

She now fears they will be deported to Haiti, a country roiled by political instability, civil unrest and violence.

[A NorthJersey investigation saved Haitian Americans from deportation, torture. Here's how](#)

"I left my country because it's really unsafe. Now, it's very hard, you know. You have to pay bills," said the woman, who also had to leave a second job at Walmart.

At Interfaith-RISE, a refugee resettlement organization based in Highland Park, Rev. Seth Kaper-Dale said his staff has seen hundreds of Haitian workers lose jobs this year.

The agency had found work for nearly 5,000 Haitian immigrants in just over two years — including 950 in health care jobs, he said.

"We have watched probably a thousand people lose their jobs this summer," Kaper-Dale said. "All the Walmart folks, they all received layoffs. A bakery company, they laid off everyone. Nursing homes, they laid off a ton of people. All of these people who frankly helped us rebuild our economy after COVID and helped us not fall into a recession."

They have been pushed from self-sufficiency to poverty, he said. U.S. officials are urging immigrants who lose legal status to self-deport.

Some, like the Metuchen woman, have applied for asylum or TPS, hoping for reprieve.



East Orange Councilman Bergson Leneus, the son of Haitian immigrants, said the losses strike at the heart of New Jersey communities and economies.

“Haitians have seen health care as an honorable profession — a pathway to the American dream,” Leneus said. “It begs the question, who is going to replace these essential health care workers?”

“I know many who are thinking about leaving. Some have already been deported. The fear and pressure have taken a toll on people’s health and wellbeing.”

### **Calls for reform**

While some immigrants are losing work authorization, fewer new arrivals are coming to the United States. As of mid-2025, the nation's foreign-born population had declined by more than a million people — the first drop since the 1960s, [according to the Pew Research Center](#).

In December, the New Jersey Business Immigration Coalition [hosted a forum with health care leaders and advocates](#) who called for federal and state-level reforms to attract immigrant talent and improve healthcare access.

Among the measures, they called for: simpler pathways for foreign-trained medical professionals to get certified; vocational language classes and training; streamlined worker visas; and lifting of caps on visas for some health care professions.



With immigration shrinking instead of growing, the coalition renewed calls for reform in an Oct. 15 statement. They asked federal lawmakers “to move beyond punitive approaches and adopt immigration reforms that reflect the economic realities of the labor market.”

Their statement calls for an “earned legalization program” for law-abiding undocumented workers.

“With millions of jobs going unfilled across the country, especially in essential industries, it is counterproductive to remove workers who are already contributing and willing to meet clearly defined criteria for legal status,” the coalition wrote.

“At the same time, to prevent the reoccurrence of large-scale undocumented immigration, our legal immigration system, which dates back to 1965, needs to be updated to fill the labor needs of the future. More immigrant visas should be made available to cover shortages of workers at all skill levels.”

### **‘We have to be strong’**

Back in Metuchen, the Haitian home health aide clings to hope that a legal pathway will open for her and her daughters to remain in the U.S.

“It’s not safe in Haiti,” she said. “The violence and the gangs — we don’t know what can happen if we go back.”

Still, she tries to stay optimistic. “I tell them to be strong,” she said. “Everybody has bad moments in life. We have to be patient.”

## **How a NJ agency grapples with gutting of refugee program**



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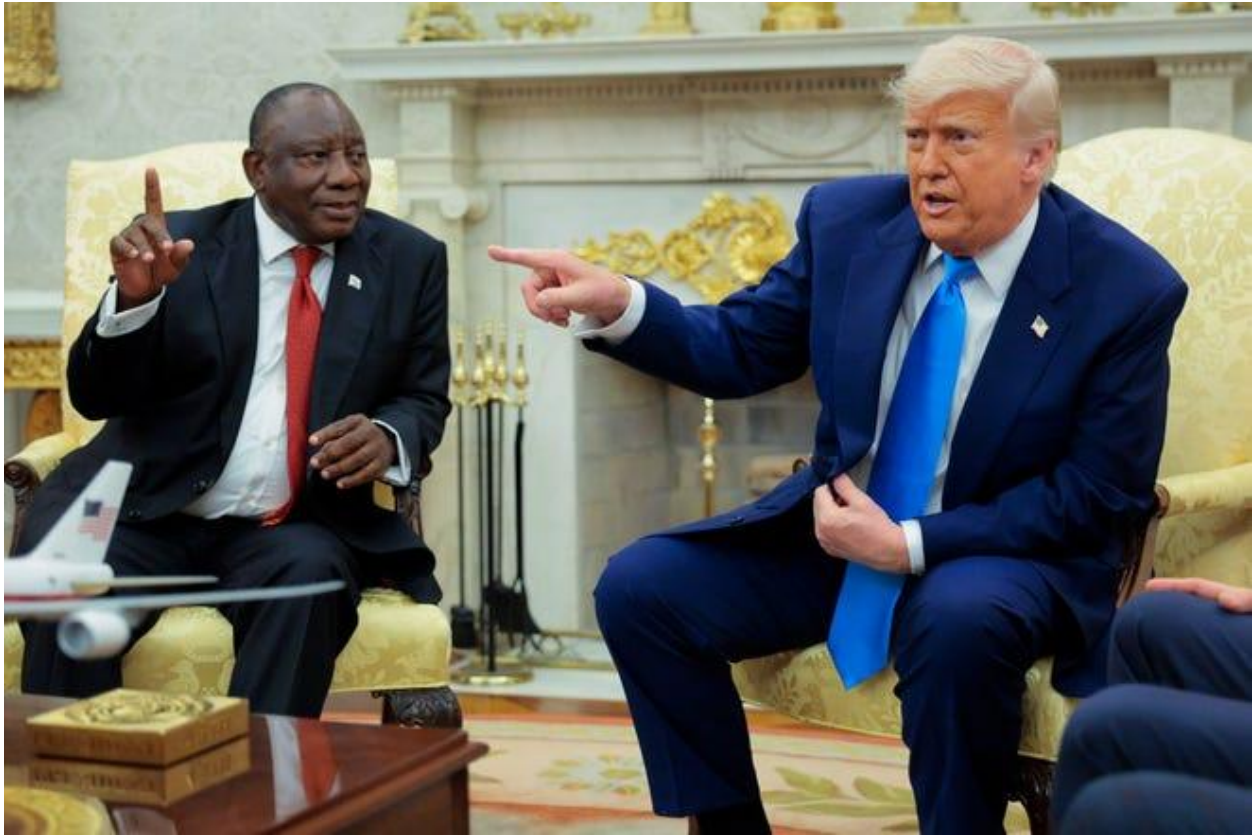
11-21-25

On a rainy Sunday in November, some 200 people marched in the annual Community Walk for Refugees and Immigrants in Highland Park to support those who fled war and persecution to make a new home in the United States.

This year, the event was overshadowed by a new reality — that the refugee resettlement program that America has shepherded for 45 years has been largely dismantled.

President Donald Trump suspended the program in January. Weeks later, he created a fast-track program for resettlement of Afrikaners, white South Africans, while shutting out other groups.

Then, on Oct. 31, he issued a [presidential determination](#) setting the annual ceiling for refugee admissions at 7,500 for fiscal year 2026, the lowest in U.S. history. Under that directive, Afrikaners will continue to be the priority.



It's a policy that the Rev. Seth Kaper-Dale, director of Interfaith-RISE, the refugee agency affiliate that hosted the walk in Highland Park, has refused to support.

"To say no to Black and brown people in crisis around the world and say yes to Afrikaners just undercuts the actual definition of refugee," Kaper-Dale said. "It plays into the total and complete xenophobia and racism that this administration has been promoting. I'm not going to do that."

"We set up Interfaith-RISE to resettle refugees who are victims of war, victims of natural disasters, victims of the worst kind of persecution you could experience in the world. What's happened this year is the president has just taken a completely different track."

Refugee agencies and their affiliates around the country are grappling with the gutting of the refugee program. The U.S. Department of State ended agreements with nine main refugee agencies and their affiliates in February, leading to layoffs and service cuts.

Asked to settle Afrikaners, some have refused, including [Episcopal Migration Ministries](#) — one of the nine main agencies — and affiliates like [Interfaith-RISE](#). They

argue that the administration is putting politics ahead of humanitarian needs, while stranding tens of thousands of refugees who have already been vetted and approved to travel.

Trump said the overhaul of the refugee program was motivated by national interests, including public safety, expense and the capacity for the United States to absorb newcomers. The president and U.S. officials also say Afrikaners warrant resettlement due to systemic racial discrimination, although the South African government has disputed the allegations as baseless.

### **Lost and gained**

By refusing to sign a federal request to settle Afrikaners, Kaper-Dale said Interfaith-RISE lost access to federal programs that help move refugees to self-sufficiency. These programs provide services like English training, job placement and case management to help with integration and social services.

Interfaith-RISE was also at risk of losing “carryover” funding for refugee support services. The annual sum fluctuates, but last year, it amounted to \$1 million, Kaper-Dale said.

Even without new arrivals, Interfaith-RISE continues to assist more than 2,000 clients who have come in the past few years, including refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants who entered with humanitarian parole but who have since lost work permits under new federal policy.



"It's sad to lose that," Kaper-Dale said. "But if the government is not in a position where it wants to use the wealth of the world to make things more just and loving, I really don't want a part of that money."

The Walk for Refugees [has raised about \\$205,000](#) to support the nonprofit's programs.

"We are raising money to ensure that refugees we have can remain here," he added, "and have legal status, a roof over their heads and the ability to develop their hopes and dreams."

### **Afrikaner controversy**

Trump and administration officials have said that Afrikaners, mainly descendants of Dutch and French colonial settlers, face persecution and "white genocide" based on their race in the Black-majority country. Trump raised the claims, which have circulated in global far-right chatrooms, at a press briefing and at a contentious White House meeting with South African President Cyril Ramaphosa in May.

The South African government has [refuted the allegations](#) as "widely discredited and unsupported by reliable evidence."

The clash comes amid mounting political tensions. [Trump's executive order](#) that established an exclusive pathway for Afrikaners also cut off all aid to the sub-Saharan country. The order cites “egregious actions” by the South African government, including a land reform law allowing land seizures for public use and South Africa’s genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice, which the administration views as hostile to the U.S. and its ally.

The land reform law attempts to redress inequalities in land ownership that are a legacy of apartheid and colonialism. [About three-quarters](#) of privately-owned farmland in South Africa is in the hands of white landowners, who make up less than 8% of the population. No land has been expropriated and the government has instead encouraged white farmers to sell their land willingly.

Independent researchers have also disputed the claim of genocide. Out of 26,000 murders in South Africa last year, 44 were linked to farming communities and of those eight were farmers — mostly tied to robbery, according to the [Institute for Security Studies](#).

Between May and September, about 130 Afrikaners were resettled in the United States, Reuters reported. The State Department declined to give updated numbers but said it has seen “strong interest” and is working to process eligible applicants quickly.

#### [NJ families in a 'state of desperation' as Trump suspends refugee admissions](#)

"The Department is committed to carrying out this White House priority and continues to process those eligible for this program expeditiously," it said in a statement.

Trump’s directive also allows the U.S. to consider “other victims of illegal or unjust discrimination” for admission. An internal April memo suggested the administration could prioritize Europeans who face targeting for views such as opposition to mass migration or support for populist parties, [Reuters reported](#).

The administration’s suspension of refugee resettlement stranded refugees who had gone through extensive vetting and been approved to travel. Some had been waiting to reunite with family in the United States.

#### **End of an era**



The sweeping changes mark a drastic shift from a longstanding humanitarian tradition of settling refugees — one that became politicized when Trump entered his first term and deemed it a security threat.

“In a short period of time, the U.S. has gone from a country that welcomes the most vulnerable refugees to one that excludes them,” said Dr. Beth Oppenheim, CEO of the refugee agency HIAS, or Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

“We are witnessing the destruction of the refugee program, and we are heartbroken for all of the many people who dreamed of finally reaching safety here, and who will not be able to attain it.”

The gutting of the program, say critics, is part of a larger federal agenda to expel or keep immigrants out of the United States, especially non-white immigrants.

“At a time when Black refugees from Haiti, Sudan, the Congo, and Cameroon are drowning at sea, languishing in detention, or being deported to death, the U.S. government has decided to open its arms to those who already enjoy global privilege,” Guerline Jozef, executive director of [Haitian Bridge Alliance](#), an advocacy group. “This is not just immoral — it’s anti-Blackness codified into federal policy.”

Even without new arrivals, need remains for many agencies as the federal government cuts refugee services. Agencies like Interfaith-RISE rely on community donations to keep up support programs.

Donations, said the pastor, will help to provide “rent and food and other basic needs for those who left tremendous hardship to come to a place that was supposed to treat them with dignity and respect.”

*This article contains information from Reuters.*