

In candlelight vigils, hundreds unite to show that ‘Nebraskans will accept Syrian refugees’

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“We live in a tumultuous time, and fear stalks our homes, our streets and our public officials.”

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Andrew J. Nelson and Colleen Fell / World-Herald staff writers

Several hundred people stood with candles in an otherwise darkened Omaha park Monday evening to show support for Syrian and other refugees.

The candles, they said, represented the light of hope in the darkness of fear. Many spoke of the prevalence of fear, expressed in vitriolic statements on the Internet and elsewhere.

“We live in a tumultuous time, and fear stalks our homes, our streets and our public officials,” said the Rev. **Damon Laaker, pastor of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church** in Omaha.

The 5:30 p.m. vigil on the soccer field of Gifford Park near 33rd and Cass Streets **was organized by the Refugee Empowerment Center, Omaha Together One Community and Nebraska Appleseed.**

Gov. Pete Ricketts is among dozens of U.S. governors who have called on President Barack Obama to suspend resettlement plans for Syrian refugees, in light of reports that one person involved in the Paris terrorist attacks traveled to France via Greece with a fake Syrian passport. Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad also is calling for a pause.

The event had a decidedly religious bent; many of the speakers and organizers were members of the clergy.

“It’s important that we don’t let fear and misunderstanding stop us from doing what is just,” **the Rev. Mike Eckley of St. Pius X Catholic Church** said in an interview.

Supporters of accepting Syrian refugees say they already undergo numerous security checks and interviews. Former refugees at Monday’s vigil described a years-long process to reach the United States and Omaha.

“It took me and my family a long time to do the process to come to the United States,” said Mary George, who came from South Sudan.

“I think we’re sending a message, hopefully to the governor, that Nebraskans will accept Syrian refugees,” said Sherry Houston of Papillion. “Not everybody wants to be isolationist.”

Houston said she is upset by what she is reading on social media, where acquaintances have posted opinions that seem to her to be reminiscent of Nazi Germany.

“I’ve been appalled at the postings on Facebook,” she said. “I’ve considered deleting myself and just getting off it. Then I did delete several people. It’s depressing.”

A similar vigil took place Monday in Lincoln at Tower Square, 13th and P Streets, where about 600 people gathered. The crowd raised red and white candles as religious and community leaders urged Nebraskans to welcome all refugees. Nebraska Appleseed also organized the Lincoln event.

“What matters is that when we speak of the Syrian refugee crisis, we remain human,” said the Rev. Jacob Buchholz, associate pastor of First-Plymouth Church in Lincoln.

Buchholz said that regardless of religion or nationality, Nebraska has a responsibility to serve those in need. In 2014, Nebraska had more than 1,000 refugee arrivals, according to the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

“Refugees ... have nowhere else to go, period,” said Sief Mahagoub, who is from Sudan.

Mahagoub, who came to the United States in 1999 at the age of 32, said he was the first Sudanese refugee in Nebraska to enlist in the Army after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. He said he served for more than 12 years.

“Your fight is our fight. Your pain is our pain,” he told the crowd.

Mahagoub said the Islamic State is a common enemy of the United States and of refugees.

The key to welcoming refugees is getting to know one, he said.

“Let’s have a dialogue, let’s talk to each other.

“I am a son of Nebraska. I am home,” Mahagoub said.

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