

**LIVING UP TO AMERICA'S PROMISE:
THE NEED TO BOLSTER THE
U.S. REFUGEE ADMISSIONS PROGRAM**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION,
CITIZENSHIP, AND BORDER SAFETY

OF THE

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UNITED STATES SENATE**

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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 22, 2023

UNITED STATES SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION, CITIZENSHIP,
AND BORDER SAFETY,
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY,
Washington, DC.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice at 2:32 p.m., in Room 226, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Alex Padilla, Chair of the Subcommittee, presiding.

Present: Senators Padilla [presiding], Whitehouse, Klobuchar, Coons, Welch, and Cornyn.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ALEX PADILLA,
A U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA**

Chair PADILLA. Good afternoon, everybody. I'd like to call this hearing to order. Welcome to the first hearing of the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Safety for the 118th Congress. The theme of today's hearing is "Living Up to America's Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program," and it's our goal to have a productive discussion on the historic success of America's Refugee Admissions Program and what we can and should be doing to bolster the program going into the future.

I want to begin by thanking all of our witnesses for being here today and for sharing your stories, your experience, your perspective, and your work. I also want to thank Chairman Durbin and Ranking Member Cornyn and their Committee staff for the work that's gone into making this hearing happen. Now, since the founding of our Nation, the United States has been seen as a beacon of light for people around the world, people with dreams of economic opportunity, of religious and political freedom, and of a home free from violence and conflict.

And over generations, the view of America as a refuge for immigrants has been embraced across party lines. You can open up America's storybook to find a Democratic President-elect Kennedy and a Republican President Reagan invoking the same quote of Puritans setting out for New England, describing America as a "City upon a Hill." And here in the Senate, you can find countless examples of Senators from both sides of the aisle coming together to support and defend refugees.

As recently as 2019, nine Republican Senators joined with nine Democrats to write to the Trump administration opposing the potential elimination of refugee resettlements in America. That list of Senators includes many still serving in this body today like Senators Lankford, Coons, Rounds, Shaheen, Thune, and Van Hollen. I won't name them all, but just to give you a flavor of Democrats and Republicans coming together on this issue.

There's many more, and I will be submitting this particular letter that I referenced and others into the record later in the hearing. But I raised this as just one example of many that we'll hear about today that shows Americans from every background vocalizing their support for refugees. They do so because the belief in America as a welcoming nation for immigrants is embedded in what we know as the American Dream, where immigrants with dreams for a better future can work hard enough and dream big enough to make it here.

And while we have never fully lived up to that idea, one area where we've had remarkable bipartisan cooperation over the last half century is in our commitment to resettling refugees. The modern U.S. Refugee Program began with the Immigration and Nationality Act and the Refugee Act of 1980, which together established a permanent basis for refugees to be resettled each year. In the 1980s and 1990s, the number of refugees admitted into the United States on an annual basis never really fell below 61,000, and in fact, reached its highest level of 207,000 in 1980. In more recent years, that number has fluctuated in the area of 56,000 and 85,000.

Now, this all took a drastic turn during the Trump administration. With his clear intent to reduce the number of immigrants entering the United States, President Trump attempted to shut off all points of entry. His efforts included aggressively reducing refugee admissions, slashing the total number admitted down to around 22,500 to 30,000, and finally just under 12,000 in his final 3 years in office. Now, because of these dramatic cuts, 134 resettlement offices throughout the country were shut without enough refugees being processed to justify the costs of staff and offices.

Now, during that time, conditions only worsened for millions of refugees fleeing persecution, and the COVID-19 pandemic created additional unprecedented challenges in processing refugees, as in-person screenings were delayed and increased demand for flights made refugee travel more difficult. And while the Biden administration has made efforts to rebuild and scale the refugee program back up, the Trump era cuts and the culmination of COVID processing challenges have made it difficult to return to the typical historic annual admissions numbers.

But today, according to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there are more refugees than at any point in history, and the political situations in Afghanistan, Ukraine, and elsewhere have only made that population grow. In the coming years, we know that our changing climate will only lead to even more displacement. So we have a moral responsibility as well as the urgency to step up.

While the process by which the Biden administration has expedited processing for Ukrainians and Afghans differ from the typical refugee admissions process, I hope that the urgency of the cir-

cumstances and the efficiency demonstrated over the last year and a half provide an example to follow as we search for solutions. It's important that we act thoughtfully, not just because so many people are counting on us, but because we also know the enormous value that refugees bring to our country.

Past refugees are now our families, neighbors, coworkers, and in many ways critical parts of our communities. They're also a critical part of our economy.

[Poster is displayed.]

Chair PADILLA. As the chart behind me shows, taken together, the spending power of all refugees and former refugees living in the United States amounts to \$73 billion. They pay a combined \$26 billion in Federal, State, and local taxes, and they often fill critical workforce gaps, including working on the front lines during the COVID-19 pandemic in healthcare and food supply chain industries, among others.

And they've become so integral to our community that you don't have to look far to find a refugee who serves as the cornerstone of their community, people like Basma Alawee, a refugee who fled Iraq and became a math and science teacher teaching at a middle school in Atlantic Beach, Florida, or Emma Yaaka, an Ugandan refugee who works in the healthcare field and has dedicated himself to advocating for equal medical services for refugees.

And just last week, a former refugee won an Academy Award for best-supporting actor. Ke Huy Quan's family fled Vietnam on a boat after the Communist takeover of South Vietnam, and he spent a year in a refugee camp in Hong Kong before being admitted to the United States. On the biggest stage in Hollywood, accepting his Oscar, he said of his journey, "This is the American Dream."

So today, this Committee is tasked with answering the question, "How can we keep that dream alive?" In our discussion today, I want us to be clear and focused. We are discussing refugees and the refugee resettlement process. I'm asking all Members of the Committee to stay focused and not distract this good-faith discussion with arguments over our asylum process, which is a different legal pathway, or debates over the southern border.

Today, our witnesses, our experts here, are here to discuss the refugee admission process wherein refugees who have fled their home country for fear of persecution apply for admission to the U.S. and are thoroughly vetted outside of the U.S. before they can enter our country. And we'll be exploring that during the hearing as well. As we'll discuss, refugees are one of the most thoroughly vetted groups, having to fill out multiple forms, go through numerous interviews, and pass numerous agency vetting processes, and even go through medical screenings before they can step foot on U.S. soil.

Today's discussion will be about shoring up one of the lawful pathways to come to the United States through the refugee admissions process. I'm looking forward to hearing from all three witnesses here today, and it's my sincere hope that we can work together to get our refugee admissions process back to a standard that reflects our Nation's values. And with that, I'll turn it over to Ranking Member Cornyn for his opening statement.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JOHN CORNYN,
A U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF TEXAS**

Senator CORNYN. Well, thank you, Chairman Padilla, and thanks to each of our witnesses for being here today. I'm proud of this country's commitment to offering a place of refuge to people fleeing persecution on account of their race, their religion, their nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Just over 2 years ago, I collaborated with the Chairman of this Committee, Senator Durbin, to hold a hearing in this Subcommittee on how the United States can support Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement through our refugee policy.

I also joined Senators Rubio, Coons, Tillis, Durbin, and others to encourage the Secretary of State to grant priority to refugee status to Uyghurs who are being persecuted by the Chinese Communist Party, basically held in concentration camps, about a million Uyghurs in the People's Republic of China. America should continue its tradition of welcoming refuge and resettling those fleeing oppression.

President Ronald Reagan in his first year of office stated, "More than any other country, our strength comes from our own immigrant heritage and our capacity to welcome those from other lands." He went on, however, to say, "No free and prosperous nation by itself can accommodate all those who seek a better life or flee prosecution."

We must share this responsibility with other countries, and that's what the Refugee Resettlement Program does. No refugee can self-select their coming to the United States. They can be resettled in a number of other countries. All free nations need to share that commitment, but we should not lose sight of the fact that the refugee system is fundamentally about providing a path to safety, not necessarily a path to the United States.

Furthermore, the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program is not the solution to the chaos and the crisis that we see on our southern border. In January, President Biden announced a new measure to address the border crisis, including a provision that would welcome up to 20,000 refugees from Latin America and Caribbean countries during FY 2023 and 2024. I understand that the administration's new strategy includes other components as well, most of which I believe will merely camouflage the severity of the problem we're experiencing.

But let's be clear, increasing refugee resettlement is not the solution to what we see on the border happening today. In each of the last 2 fiscal years, U.S. Customs and Border Protection encountered 1.3 million migrants from Mexico and Northern Triangle countries. So at the pace of 20,000, this is a drop in the bucket. It will not alleviate the strain caused by the current crisis on our southern border and it will not prevent migrants with weak or non-existent asylum claims from unlawfully crossing the border.

The solution of the crisis lies in enforcing our immigration laws and deterring migrants from undertaking the dangerous journey to the southern border when they do not have a valid basis for asylum. Unfortunately, the Biden administration has not shown a willingness to quickly remove migrants with frivolous or no asylum claims. So there's just simply no consequences associated with com-

ing here, claiming asylum, being released into the interior of the country, perhaps never to be heard from again.

Certainly, the administration has taken zero efforts to actually—once people fail to show up for their asylum hearing, assuming they can get one in a reasonable period of time—those who don't qualify, there is no program or system for removal of those individuals who don't meet the legal threshold for asylum.

Just last week, the New York Post reported that a migrant who was paroled, which means in this context to be released into the United States to await a future court hearing—the New York Post reported that a migrant who's paroled in New York City today will have to wait until October 2032—2032—to receive his or her notice to appear, which starts the immigration court process. That's a 10-year wait to even begin the process.

Meanwhile, that individual's set down roots, perhaps married, has children, and it is a disservice to those with valid asylum claims to make them wait so long when 85 percent or so of the individuals who do actually present in front of an immigration judge do not qualify. It's unfair to those who do qualify. Paroling a migrant into the United States and waiting nearly a decade to start deciding whether or not he or she has a valid asylum claim is absurd. But that's just another consequence of the current policy by this administration at the border.

I think this stands in stark contrast to the sober deliberate process of considering refugee applications through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. But you look at the number that President Biden's administration has set for the cap for a year, it's 125,000. During the first 2½ years of the Biden administration, we've seen 5 million migrants show up at our southern border. So 125,000 is not a significant number when considered in that context. But the process is sound, I believe.

The applicants for the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program undergo multiple rounds of interviews and submit to multiple and continuous background checks to determine whether or not they pose a safety or security risk to the United States. Their biographic and biometric information's checked against the U.S. Department of State, the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Defense, FBI, and National Counterterrorism Center holdings. And there's a randomness factor, too.

The likelihood that any individual refugee will be sent to the United States is low, so low that it is a poor vehicle for terror groups of those who intentionally want to come to the United States to do so. It's a whole lot easier to show up on the border and claim asylum and then be paroled under current policies into the United States. So I don't believe the Refugee Resettlement Program represents a substantial safety risk, but I'm anxious to hear what the witnesses have to say.

When a refugee is finally admitted to the United States, he or she is qualified as a refugee. Although no system is perfect, we've taken significant measures to screen out those who would seek to do us harm or come lying about or misrepresenting their circumstances. So again, this stands in sharp contrast to the chaos we see at the southern border.

Since the beginning of the Biden administration, more than 800,000 migrants have been paroled into the United States. Again, this is the process by which they show up, they're given a notice to appear or told to report for a future court hearing but then released into the interior of the United States. Again, and only a small percentage, maybe 15 percent, ultimately qualify. And many don't show up for a court hearing, but there's never a process, a systematic way to try to remove those who do not qualify even if they don't show up.

We will not begin to decide whether they qualify for asylum for years, in some cases, as I said, more than a decade, but we know historically that about 85 percent do not qualify for asylum. And again, if you think about the unfairness to people who actually do, making them wait for 10 years before actually getting an asylum hearing because of the backlog caused by people who do not qualify, is very unfair. Security screenings for migrants at the border does not even begin to approach the rigorous process refugees undergo.

True, Border Patrol has successfully screened out some criminals and individuals who matched records on the Terrorist Screening data set, and I look forward to asking General Burns about his experience. And the numbers are increasing. In 2020, Border Patrol apprehended only three individuals who matched records on the Terrorist Screening data set. That number has increased to 15 in FY 2021, to 98 in 2022, and 69 so far in 2023. In other words, in 2023, 69 people so far who were apprehended—we're not talking about the gotaways—the ones that were apprehended were on the Terrorist Screening watchlist.

Well, in FY 2022, we don't have an exact number, but it's estimated that there are about 600,000 migrants who did not run to the Border Patrol to claim asylum. They ran away from the Border Patrol because, frankly, they knew they couldn't qualify or they knew that they were transporting drugs or for some other reason they would not be able to legally make it into the United States. Recent estimates in the media place this number for Fiscal 2023 at more than 350,000 gotaways so far.

I recently was in El Paso with some colleagues at a night patrol where they detained two gentlemen from the People's Republic of China. This is El Paso, Texas. The People's Republic of China is a long way away. And we don't really know why they decided to come to El Paso, Texas, or what they will do once they're paroled into the United States awaiting a immigration court hearing.

We should, together with the rest of the world, offer protection of victims of persecution. There's no difference between us on that score. But allowing chaos to persist at the southern border is counterproductive, to say the least. The Biden administration can do better and must do better. We need a safe, orderly, humane, and legal system for people to come to the United States. I believe we have that in the Refugee Resettlement Program. We do not have it at the southern border, thanks to the administration's failed policies. Thank you.

Chair PADILLA. Thank you, Senator Cornyn. Thank you for recognizing the distinction. And again, today's hearing is focused on the Refugee Admissions Program and settlement process. I want to

welcome Senator Welch to today's hearing. We'll acknowledge other Members as they arrive. Well, let's proceed now with witness introductions, then we'll swear in the witnesses, and begin.

After I introduce and swear in the witnesses, they will each have 5 minutes to offer opening remarks. We will then begin our first round of questions, and each Senator will have 5 minutes. So, I'd like to begin with Mr. Dauda Sesay. Mr. Sesay is the national network director of African Communities Together and vice chair of the Refugee Congress Board of Directors. Mr. Sesay fled Sierra Leone at age 16 due to a brutal war and was in a refugee camp in The Gambia for nearly 10 years before he was resettled in the United States.

Today, he serves as National Network Director for African Communities Together and is a founding member and president of the Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants, a nonprofit community-based organization that assists refugees and immigrants through their various stages of integration into the United States. Mr. Sesay is also a member of the Mayor Sharon Weston Broome International Relations Commission, and chairperson of the Commission on Culture and Art Engagement, a commission established to help make the city of Baton Rouge more inclusive and welcoming.

He was recently appointed as the first refugee to serve as U.S. advisor at the UNHCR High-Level Officials Meeting on Global Impact on Refugees in December of 2021 and on the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement in June 2022. Most recently, he was among the first advisors to serve on the United States Refugee Advisory Board.

We also welcome Mr. Bill Canny. Mr. Canny has served as executive director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Department of Migration and Refugee Services since 2015. In this capacity, he is responsible for all of the Department of Migration and Refugee Services operations, including its role as National Refugee Resettlement Agency and its programs for unaccompanied migrant children and unaccompanied refugee minors.

Mr. Canny has an impressive career history that spans from Catholic Relief Services to the International Catholic Migration Commission in Geneva to the Papal Foundation. He has managed and executed relief in development operations in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. He oversaw programs in war-torn Kosovo, Albania, Afghanistan, Indonesia, and East Timor, as well as refugee processing in Thailand, Croatia, and Turkey.

He has also advocated internationally in support of rights-based policies and long-term solutions in collaboration with Catholic Bishops' conferences around the world. And I'll now turn it over to Senator Cornyn to introduce General Burns.

Senator CORNYN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to introduce Brigadier General Christopher Burns, who's retired from the United States Army. General Burns completed 36 years of service to our country, culminating as the Commander of Special Operations Command North at Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado. In 1987, he was commissioned as a distinguished graduate of the ROTC program at the University of Connecticut.

Following his training to become a U.S. Army Special Forces Officer in Rhode Island, he spent 36 years, as I said, working in numerous Theater Special Operation Commands, Joint Special Operations Task Force, U.S. Special Operations Command, and the Joint Staff. He's been previously deployed in staff and command positions in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Thank you for your service, General, and welcome.

Chair PADILLA. Thank you, Senator Cornyn. I'll ask each of the witnesses to please rise and raise your right hands.

[Witness are sworn in.]

Chair PADILLA. Thank you. You may be seated. Let the record reflect all witnesses have acknowledged in the affirmative. And with that, let's begin with witness testimony starting with Mr. Sesay.

**STATEMENT OF DAUDA SESAY, NATIONAL NETWORK
DIRECTOR, AFRICAN COMMUNITY TOGETHER; VICE CHAIR,
REFUGEE CONGRESS BOARD OF DIRECTORS; AND FOUNDER
AND PRESIDENT, LOUISIANA ORGANIZATION FOR
REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS, BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA**

Mr. SESAY. Chairman Padilla, Ranking Member Cornyn, honorable Members of the Judiciary Committee, I humbly greet you all in my special way, and I want to thank you for holding this crucial and timely hearing. My name is Dauda Sesay. My wife, daughter, and I came to the United States as refugees from Sierra Leone in 2009. I am deeply honored for the opportunity to testify before this Subcommittee because one of my personal connection to the Refugee Resettlement Program, and to express my gratitude to my fellow Americans for welcoming me and others like me to this country.

In the 1990s, my country, Sierra Leone, was violently attacked in one of the bloodiest civil wars that resulted in over 70,000 people being killed and almost 2.5 million people displaced. That war was defined by widespread atrocities, including amputations, child soldiers, pregnant women undergoing brutal stillbirths, family burnt alive, including mine. So many children like me had to endure these atrocities.

At a young age, I had an aspirations and dreams to study medicine and become a gynecologist or a pediatrician because my country at that time had the highest and continue to have the highest infant mortality rates. But all my aspirational goals were shattered. At the age of 16, I was forced to leave everything behind after armed rebels attacked my hometown.

On that day, after school, I remember playing with my friends outside my father's work complex, waiting for our parents, when armed rebels attacked. There were gunshots everywhere. Armed men stormed the complex capturing nine of us. They placed us in line for our hands to be chopped off, using the slogan, "Do you want long sleeve?" That mean your hands will be cut here. "Do you want short sleeve?" Hands will be cut here.

In an unspeakable horror, I watch five of my childhood friends' hands were amputated. A portion of my hands were almost cutoff, and I got shot in my leg. In the midst of that, my dad came out pleading for our release, but sadly and painfully, he was killed. My

father is a true hero. He died in front of me and my friends, and he gave his life to protect us and what was left for our community.

When I regained consciousness, I later learned in an internal displaced camp that my family house was set on fire with my mom, siblings, and other relatives inside. My mom survived, but horrifically, my 7-years-old sister, an innocent baby, was burnt alive. That was a sad fact I learned when I reconnect with my mom decades later. And I remember, during one of my conversation with my mom, she said, "I am hopeful that I will see my husband again." That's my dad. She said, "The same faith that brought us together, that same faith would bring him back."

It was in that moment I realized that she didn't know that dad was killed. I had to tell her the breaking news, the heartbreaking news. Like so many refugees like me, I would have preferred to stay or remain in my homeland. However, due to the constant fear of persecution in the brutal war that took away my loved one, I had no other choice but to leave. The refugee program was my only hope. When I met my beautiful wife, who is here today with me, and my daughter in a refugee camp, life there was very tough.

We lived in a plastic tent, crowded in one big space with no privacy or sense of dignity. As one of the fortunate refugees considered for resettlement, we had to undergo many background checks, and I spent almost 10 years in the refugee camp, even with my medical conditions, before I was finally resettled in Baton Rouge. The screening process was vigorous and there were no shortcut.

After experiencing such suffering in the refugee camp, I faced post-resettlement challenges once I arrived in the United States, such as dealing with discrimination, language barriers, and learning a new way of life. My community members in Louisiana, and one of them is here with me today, helped me to get through these hardships. I enrolled in college and earned an associate degree in applied science in process technology and worked at Dow Chemical for over 7 years.

Today, I work with refugees and immigrants as the National Network Director at African Communities Together. I also founded the Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants, LORI, and I vice chair the Board of Director Refugee Congress. In my work, I see firsthand the resettlement program face serious challenges as it struggled to regain capacity. I encourage Congress as I'm here today to reaffirm its commitment to refugees by passing the Refugee Protection Act.

As someone who knows firsthand the horror that causes individual to flee and the sense of hope that finding a home bring, I am compelled to share my experience to you all today so that I can help Congress make an informed decision and ask you to help restore and strengthen this lifesaving resettlement program, a program I came through to help me be part of the fabric of this great Nation. Thank you again for your time and consideration. God bless you all.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Sesay appears as a submission for the record.]

Chair PADILLA. Thank you for sharing your powerful story. Now, I turn to Brigadier General Burns for your testimony.

**STATEMENT OF CHRISTOPHER M. BURNS, BRIGADIER
GENERAL, U.S. ARMY, RETIRED**

General BURNS. Senator Padilla, Ranking Member Cornyn, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is an honor to appear before you to discuss Refugee Admission Program. My testimony today examines the current refugee challenges through the lens of someone who has looked at this problem from a whole-of-Government approach as the former Commanding General of Special Operations Command North and prior to that as the Assistant Commanding General for Special Operations Central Command. This experience includes 36 years of service to the Nation and experiencing refugee challenges firsthand around the world.

My testimony today is my own opinion based on those years of experience and does not represent the opinion or policy of anyone else. My goal today is to hopefully bring to you a unique set of perspectives and possible points to consider as you ponder the path forward on this very challenging issue.

The first portion of my testimony will focus on the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. It has been around for some time and has shown to be an underutilized but effective program. It is thoughtfully designed and does the due diligence that is needed to ensure that the persons claiming refugee status are indeed a valid entrant to the program, that is, that the applicants are truly persecuted on the basis of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, and that they do not pose a national security threat to the United States.

This program allows United States Government to manage through a deliberate process, which in turn leads to the best-forecasted outcomes since it is a planned program. As noted, President Biden increased the number from 15,000 per year to 125,000 per year, although the administration's projected last year admissions were only 23,000 to 25, 000. This Committee has, on the whole, expressed support for helping victims of persecution through the Refugee Admissions Program. I could not agree more that this is the right way to bring in refugees who have a strong desire to be U.S. citizens.

In contrast to this orderly, deliberative process of screening refugees through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, the current situation on the southern border poses a risk to our safety and national security. Many of the migrants who have crossed the border and claimed asylum do not meet the qualifications, the same standard that applies to refugees, and desire to enter the country for economic, medical reasons, or being trafficked as slaves, sex workers, organ harvesting, drug mules, dealers, criminals on a terrorist watch list, or cartel elements. There are other reasons, but the key point is that for most, they're looking at what is the easiest way to enter the country. Some have noble reasons, some do not.

This has led to many refugees taking the easy wrong versus the hard right of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Some are convinced by cartels that the cartel's way is the best way because it is cheaper process, and they guarantee that you'll get in or they will cross you again. Some of the people are trafficked in and the cartels own them as they pay off the cost of their entry. This factor

combined with the people who do not qualify for asylum leads to a huge demand for the cartel model of entering the country.

The Biden administration has announced its intent to triple the refugee resettlement for the Western Hemisphere through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. If we don't take serious action to deter the migrants from taking the wrong way and placing their lot with the cartel, this approach will not have its intended results. It's worth pointing out that these illicit pathways have existed for decades, and the only thing that changes is the commodity that passes through them.

When I was a SOCNORTH Commander, we saw a lot of human trafficking because that was where the money was. Drugs had declined because they had become less profitable than human trafficking. Fentanyl was just starting to rise and was a concern for us given the ease of production and movement that was on the horizon. I think a point that can be made is that the size of the breakage rate or seizure of drugs and is in proportion to the amount coming across.

A large seizure means more coming across on a net basis. The best approach is to look at the cartels as a business, and they are going to move whatever commodity makes them the most money. And when that dries up, they will look at other means to generate revenue just like business. We are competing against a well-marketed program with global reach that is cheaper, faster, and has a guarantee to deliver and is highly adaptable.

So, for our program to be the program that is selected, we need to make it more attractive and also increase the difficulty of the illicit pathways. This will not be easy given the impressive track record of the cartels getting people and commodities into the United States. Some things to consider as you look to increase security on the southern border and protect those who truly persecuted, vetting needs to happen outside the country to ensure the right people enter.

Our system is not designed to quickly net large numbers of migrants on the border for the veracity of the other asylum claims, and then potentially criminal background and national security threat. Understand it is a business for the cartels, and whatever action you take, they will counter to make money. That may be a different commodity or some action inside the United States that will generate revenue with those that are indebted to them. They are in the business of making money.

A lot of disinformation is fed to those who try to transit through the border on social media, word of mouth, etc. Innovation is also taking away many lower entry-level jobs here in the United States. We need to bring in people who need our help, but we can also provide a path to success for them. If you look at Amazon Market and McDonald's, those are two examples of where reduced number of lower-entry jobs are available and you're typing in your order.

A definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different outcome. If the changes you make are working, you will see a decrease in the illegal entries and we will be able to offer refugees to the truly persecuted. If not, try something else and realize that you have a competitor who's got a market share and will adjust. From a global perspective, we need

to make sure that failed states can get their national talent back and not keep them. If not, we'll be creating an ungoverned space that various actors will exploit.

And as someone who is out there, one of the greatest fears we have is as they leave those countries, as you just said, you wanted to stay, but you can't. So how do you reconstitute that state and it becomes a failed state? So we need to be cognizant of the fact we also need to not create a brain drain in that process as we do that. I thank you for your time and look forward to any questions you might have I'll be able to answer. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of General Burns appears as a submission for the record.]

Chair PADILLA. Thank you very much. I'll buy him a minute while he takes a sip of water. We'll now hear from Mr. Canny.

**STATEMENT OF WILLIAM CANNY, EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR, MIGRATION AND REFUGEE SERVICES,
UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC
BISHOPS, WASHINGTON, DC**

Mr. CANNY. Thank you, Chairman Padilla, Ranking Member Cornyn, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee for holding this hearing and providing me with the opportunity to testify. I have had the privilege of leading migration and refugee services at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for the past 7 years. During that period and over the course of my career, I have witnessed the Refugee Admissions Program at its highest and lowest points. With each, I have only grown in my appreciation for the program, its lifesaving impact, and all those who work to make it one of the most successful human enterprises in human history.

In 1980, Congress standardized the process of resettlement and established the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, USRAP. The USCCB became one of the original resettlement agencies for USRAP, building on decades of prior experience helping refugees integrate into American communities. Historically, the USCCB has been the largest of these organizations. This reflects the Catholic Church's long-standing commitment to welcoming newcomers and protecting the life and dignity of our most vulnerable brothers and sisters.

Our work is motivated by the Gospel, which calls us to welcome the stranger as we would Christ and see him in all those we serve. Much about our country and our world has changed since 1980, but the Refugee Admissions Program remains true to its roots, an expansive public-private partnership supported by a diverse group of faith-based organizations alongside a number of secular partners. Local agencies and communities across 48 States play a crucial role in welcoming refugees.

Meanwhile, those resettled through USRAP continue to be some of the most vulnerable and robustly vetted refugees in the world. In 2020, we commemorated the 40th anniversary of USRAP. Unfortunately, 1 year later, we observed another milestone, an all-time low number of annual admissions with fewer than 12,000 refugees admitted that year. This pales in comparison to the historical average of about 80,000 annual admissions, spanning both Republican and Democratic administrations.

In large part, this decline can be attributed to policies put in place by the prior administration combined with a devastating toll of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this program and those who support its operation have demonstrated a strong resolve and a capacity to adapt. There is perhaps no better illustration of this than the Herculean effort undertaken by the resettlement community to welcome almost 80,000 Afghans over the span of 7 months in 2021 and 2022. This could not have been accomplished without the steadfast support and participation of Americans from all walks of life, including many veterans and veterans' organizations.

While many of these Afghans have already become integral members of new communities, as humanitarian parolees, they lack the certainty provided to those with refugee status. There remains an urgent need for Congress to pass the bipartisan Afghan Adjustment Act. In many ways, USRAP is at a crossroads. The program has been slow to rebuild processing infrastructure, and significant case backlogs continue to delay resettlement and family reunification.

So far, this fiscal year, out of a possible 125,000 admissions, based on the Presidential determination, less than 15,000 refugees have been admitted to the United States, excluding, of course, Afghan and Ukrainian parolees, who are also served by the resettlement agencies. That said, there is much opportunity to innovate and improve efficiency within the program. The current administration has made some steps forward in this regard, but Congress' continued commitment, oversight, and investment are needed.

Early in his Presidency, Ronald Reagan described refugee policy as, and I quote, "an important part of our past and fundamental to our national interest." President Reagan recognized that in resettling refugees, we further our reputation as a nation of opportunity, a beacon of hope, and an adversary of oppression while at the same time advancing our national security and foreign policy objectives.

Over the past 40 years, a strong bipartisan majority of Congress has shared this view. With record levels of forced displacement around the globe, it is my hope and prayer that you'll join with communities across our country in bolstering this program for the next 40 years and beyond. Thank you again. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Canny appears as a submission for the record.]

Chair PADILLA. Thank you, Mr. Canny, and to all of you for your opening statements. We will now proceed to questions from the Committee. And I'd like to begin by asking Mr. Canny for some help. I think there's often confusion among the various ways individuals fleeing persecution can enter the United States. Oftentimes, refugees and asylum seekers are conflated. Now, many times it's unintentional. Sometimes, it's very intentional.

In addition, with the recent surge in Afghan and Ukrainian arrivals to do the parole process, the different pathways into the United States has gotten even more complex. One thing is clearer though. These were all lawful and unique pathways for individuals and families to come to the United States and seek safety. So, Mr. Canny, can you spend a minute just explaining the differences between asylum, refugees, and parolees so we can ensure that the

focus of this hearing remains, as I mentioned at the outset, on the refugee process specifically?

Mr. CANNY. So a refugee in the context of this program is generally referred to the United States by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee. They've been determined to have refugee status by the U.N., but they go through a process outside of the country, and they're often in either refugee camps or other parts of cities outside of the country, a process of vetting, process of determining if they meet the criteria, are they a threat, etc., and through that process are admitted or rejected to the program.

An asylum seeker comes into the country and, at that point, makes a case for their own persecution, which is similar to a refugee, but a case for their own persecution or the possibility of persecution before courts while they were in the country.

A parolee, oftentimes referred to as a humanitarian parolee, comes on a parolee visa. They are allowed in for humanitarian purposes, also for perhaps the good of the United States as it may be determined. And they come in and they are allowed in for a short period of time, usually, in these recent instances, 2 years, perhaps 1, and they are here for a short period of time with no guarantee of a path toward residency in the United States. So those are the three distinctions.

Chair PADILLA. Thank you, very helpful and useful here. So how is the program going? I think we've laid out some history through our opening statements. The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program has on average admitted 80,000 annually since 1980, and it has only been since 2017 that the number has dropped significantly. The Trump administration's severe cuts to the number of refugees admitted into the U.S. even though the program had enjoyed robust bipartisan support for nearly four decades.

And despite the fact that, you know, through this program, refugees could enter United States with arguably the most significant vetting process in place. Then COVID-19 dramatically limited the ability of refugees to be processed as USCIS officers could not go abroad to interview them. So COVID offered additional challenges. While the Biden administration has set the refugee ceiling number at 62,500 for FY 2021 and 125,000 for FY 2022, only 11,411 and 25,465 were admitted in those years, respectively, creating this significant gap between the cap and the actual number admitted, again, as the chart behind me demonstrates.

[Poster is displayed.]

Chair PADILLA. So, question for Mr. Canny, can you discuss what challenges the Biden administration has faced in rebuilding the refugee program and what actions the administration can take to resettle closer to that 125,000 number of refugees by the end of FY 2024?

Mr. CANNY. The challenges have been many, but they've been primarily, I would say, staffing—staffing particularly with DHS, USCIS, refugee officers, who by the way are well trained once they are hired and trained to go out and do the work. They have not had enough, due to staffing, primarily circuit rides to go out and adjudicate refugees. They've been slow to restaff refugee processing centers, the seven that we have overseas, to get them again staffed

up to adjudicate the numbers of refugees that we would like to get into this process.

They've also been, I would say, distracted for good purposes, with the Afghan evacuation, and the system was forced to focus on the 80,000 Afghans that came in. I'm proud to say that our Government and our communities and the nonprofits that worked in that did a fantastic job. That was, you know, at sort of the expense to a degree of getting other refugees into the country through the pipeline to reach the 125,000 that you mentioned.

I think the security vetting that they've inherited from the Trump administration previously, I think needs to be looked at again. My concern, and I'm not an expert, that some of the vetting that was put into place by the last administration may not be as meaningful as it should be. It could also have some processes that are duplicative. I think we need to look at those processes of duplication also in order to get this pipeline moving in the pace that we need to complete, 125,000 by 2024.

Chair PADILLA. Thank you very much. Senator Cornyn.

Senator CORNYN. As I said at the beginning, I think the Refugee Resettlement Program is a good model. And for a variety of reasons, I think it works, and I'm certainly willing to work with my colleagues in the administration in making sure that more people get access to this program. But I'm struck, General Burns, by the differences that Mr. Canny described, and I'm going to ask him a little bit about it, too.

It is confusing between refugees and people seeking asylum and then those who simply come in, let's say, to the border and if you're an unaccompanied child, there's another process. There are the gotaways. It's a hodgepodge of different programs and different ways into the United States, but it strikes me, General, that the protections that, for example, Mr. Sesay and his family went through in terms of vetting and that sort of thing, that it's completely absent when it comes to people who show up on the border from anywhere around the world and simply make a claim for asylum.

I think Mr. Canny said the test is basically the same, credible fear of persecution for these various categories, but because of the volume of people coming across, they're simply released into the interior and given a notice to appear for a future court hearing. So, in the refugee program, it seems like there's significant vetting. There's no self-selection process. My understanding is about 35 countries accept the vast majority of these refugees.

So somebody can't say, "I'm a refugee. I want to go to the United States." They get assigned to one of these countries. Now, certainly, the numbers are dramatically different: 125,000 cap for refugees and, as I mentioned, about 5 million migrants have presented at the border in the time that President Biden has been in office. And then, of course, there's the fact that there's a lawful process for refugees, and the process by which people present at the border is largely in the hands of transnational criminal organizations that care about nothing but money.

I've heard it expressed that they are something this way, that they are commodity agnostic. In other words, anything that makes them money, they will do: arms, sex trafficking, drugs, and the

like. So, as I said at the beginning, I support a safe, orderly, legal, and humane system for legal immigration, for refugee replacement, but that's not we're seeing at the border. And then, finally, General, you've talk about the global reach of this problem.

I was in El Paso recently on a night patrol with the Border Patrol, and we had two young men presenting with passports from the People's Republic of China. And how they got to El Paso, I don't know, and what they did once they were released, nobody knows. So do you consider the current chaos and lawlessness associated with what's happening at the border to be a national security risk?

General BURNS. Yes, Senator, I do. And I think the—you kind of draw it out, the point that if we have a consistent vetting process because if they're all going to enter the United States, you would want to have a consistent process for that entry to make sure that nefarious actors do not enter the United States or people that don't meet the criteria that we have. And the challenge we have is that without that consistent vetting, you have what we used to call when I was a young lieutenant, "the challenge between speed and security."

So you have a very large number jamming up the system. You need to get them worked through the process, so security gets reduced to get the speed through that process. So, whereas if you could have a consistent vetting process for all, then you would know you were in a good shape or a better shape. Everything has an error rate, but at least you would have a consistent process to follow. And also, you would create friction for the cartels in terms of how they'd be able to get it through.

And as I said in my opening comments, the problem right now is the cheapest way into the United States is through the cartels. And it's a little bit euphemistic, but you could almost argue they're the largest travel agency in the world in terms of processing people through, as you mentioned with people from China, they come from all over the globe because it's the easiest way to get in with the lowest bar. But if we have a criteria of vetting that is standard, we can handle that process and look through that.

And then, I would say the other challenge is just supporting them as they come through the process as well to make sure we put them in the right place economically so they can be successful.

Senator CORNYN. If the Chairman will allow me. I have just one quick yes or no question for Mr. Sesay and Mr. Canny. The Biden administration has recently proposed a rule they call the Circumvention of Lawful Pathways Rule that purports to establish a rebuttable presumption against asylees, in other words, a presumption ineligibility for asylum for migrants who don't follow certain prescribed pathways. Mr. Sesay, are you familiar with that proposed rule, and do you support it or oppose it?

Mr. SESAY. Thank you so much for your questions. I've heard about the ruling. One thing I know for sure when individuals seeking protections, they have the credible fear like what my family experience. If I am in that situation and America is the closest place, from what I experienced, I will definitely run and get to that place for safety because I always say this to people like refugees, "You are running when the grass under you is burning." So wherever I—

Senator CORNYN. So you would oppose a rule that has a presumption of ineligibility for asylum?

Mr. SESAY. I don't know the detail of that, but——

Senator CORNYN. That's fair enough.

Mr. SESAY. Yes.

Senator CORNYN. Mr. Canny, are you familiar with the proposed rule and——

Mr. CANNY. Not familiar with the rule, so——

Senator CORNYN. Okay. I'm striking out. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chair PADILLA. Thank you, Senator Cornyn. Senator Whitehouse.

Senator WHITEHOUSE. Thanks, Chairman, and thanks to the witnesses for coming in today. I'm from Rhode Island, and we have a pretty robust refugee program with over 1,000 refugees and parolees that have been welcomed to Rhode Island shores. We could, of course, be doing more, but we have a very long tradition of this beginning with Hmong and other Southeast Asian communities coming to Rhode Island in the wake of the Vietnam War. And so, there's a lot of community support, a lot of goodwill.

We have organizations like one that takes folks in when they arrive, gets them language support, gives them an immediate job, trains them up so that they can go elsewhere in the workforce, and our church communities are very, very strong in this, Mr. Canny. You'll be glad to hear. I understand that over a 10-year span, the Department of Health and Human Services has calculated that U.S. refugee resettlement brought in \$63 billion more in Government revenues than it cost.

So this looks like it's a net winner for us fiscally as well as culturally and from a humanitarian perspective. Mr. Canny, what would the most useful things be that we could do to undo some of the damage done to the Refugee Resettlement Program during the Trump administration and encourage all of this benefit?

Mr. CANNY. Senator, thank you. A number of things are staff up, certainly, the organizations USCIS, PERM to go out and adjudicate cases, staff up the refugee processing centers. Certainly, consider enlarging the number of processing centers. I would say looking at getting one into Pakistan would be critical to saving thousands of Afghans who are currently in Pakistan without a path out of there, without a refugee processing center or some form of means to be adjudicated.

Further, take a look at vetting. Make sure it's meaningful. Make sure that, you know, the things that have been put in the last couple years are not slowing the process down unnecessarily while guaranteeing our national security and safety. So taking a look at vetting from that perspective would be another thing that can be done. The Central American Minors Program is stalled a bit. I think it needs a push by the administration to go out and educate people on the possibilities they have to come into the country. Perhaps getting some NGO's out there to, again, provide information.

Education would be another aspect I think that would be important to increasing the number of people. The administration is doing this. This is not easy looking back at cases that have gone into sort of the black hole, sometimes termed, where people are dinged for a security reason but there's no follow-up to determine

if it was valid or not. I think that would be an important aspect in order to help tens of thousands of people in that particular position to have a re-look at their cases in fairness. So those are some of the things that I would recommend the administration do, Senator.

Senator WHITEHOUSE. Terrific. Well, that's a very helpful punch list, and I appreciate it. I would surmise that beyond the 63 billion calculable dollars that this program benefits us by, there's also a very significant benefit to our country from presenting an example of decency and refuge in the world. And I don't know how you can put a price on that, but I think Vladimir Putin is finding out the cost of doing the opposite when you are setting an example of brutality and criminality in the world. So, nice to have this as a polar opposite to that kind of behavior. And I thank the Chairman for the hearing.

Chair PADILLA. Thank you, Senator Whitehouse. Senator Welch.

Senator WELCH. I thank the Chairman for the hearing. I'm just going to make a few comments because I was able to sit through the wonderful testimony of all three of these gentlemen. Number one, I strongly support the U.S. Refugee Program. Number two, we have a real problem at the southern border. So, Senator Thune, the comments you made in the trip that you invited me on where we were exposed to just the reality of the challenges of 2 million people showing up, that's real, and we've got to deal with it. But that's a different situation than what many of the refugees have. It's entirely different.

Mr. Sesay's testimony shows that. He was not a person who wanted to leave his home. He wanted to stay in his home, and he had people with guns showing up ready to chop his hand off. That's different. And General, to some extent, I think in your testimony, many of the good points you made shouldn't be conflated with the situation at the southern border and the situation in Sierra Leone. And that's the point that I think is so important.

The southern border situation has to be dealt with, but I get worried at times that the failure of us to deal with the southern border becomes an impediment to us to deal with a separate situation that has its own independent reality and can be resolved. So this hearing was extremely helpful to me, where we could hear about the unique situation that so many refugees have. They are, by and large, people who are really dedicated to their communities. The grass is burning under them, and that's the reason that they're running. And all of us would want be welcoming in that situation.

That's different than a really serious situation of the southern border that, hopefully, this Committee will help address. And I just want to, again, thank Senator Cornyn for inviting me on, you know, an early CODEL to get exposed to that. But I just want to reassert that I fully support the U.S. Refugee Program. Vermont supports it. Senator Leahy, my predecessor, was a champion of this program. I thank you for this hearing. I yield back.

Chair PADILLA. Thank you, Senator Welch. Senator Coons.

Senator COONS. Thank you. Happy birthday, Mr. Chairman. To Chairman Padilla and to Ranking Member Cornyn, thank you for convening this hearing. And to the three witnesses today, thank you for sharing your compelling personal testimony, your experi-

ence, and your service to our Nation. This is a problem that should not be as complex to solve and as difficult enduring as it is.

As some of you have heard me say, my own interest and an exposure to refugees began when I was in middle school when my mother and many of the other women of our church offered to host a refugee family from South Vietnam. They'd been separated during the war and the head of household had fought for the army of South Vietnam and had been taken to a reeducation camp. His wife and children had fled to Thailand. And when he eventually escaped, he walked from Vietnam all the way through Cambodia to Thailand and was reunited with his family.

He was picked up by the U.S. Navy off the South China Sea. And they became a wonderful member of our community. This family thrived in the United States and is a great example, I think, of the real and concrete benefits. This is not just our opening our hearts and our country, but welcoming people of enormous creativity, who make tremendous contributions.

In 2019, Senator Lankford and I led a letter with 18 Senators urging the previous administration to reaffirm the fundamental importance of the U.S. Refugee Program for our foreign policy, economic vitality, and our core commitment to human rights. And in this spirit, Senator Klobuchar and I led an effort, that she worked harder on and was more effective on than I was, to get the Afghan Adjustment Act passed.

At the end of the last Congress, it had 10 bipartisan Co-Sponsors, and it is an effort similarly to honor the service and sacrifice of those who served alongside us and who I think deserve a legal status here. This past weekend, as Senator Welch just referenced, Senator Cornyn and I and a bipartisan group of House and Senate Members met with President Lopez Obrador in Mexico City, met with both our national security and foreign policy leaders at our embassy, and all the various cabinet members of the Mexican government to talk about the flow of guns south, the flow of fentanyl north, security along the border, the prospect of economic development jointly, but in many ways at the very center of it, this question of how do we come up with a safe, orderly, legal, and humane system.

I appreciate the administration taking some bold steps to try things that haven't worked before. They have seen some significant progress, but at the end of the day, this can only really be fixed by legislative action by Congress, not by Executive orders by the President, as significant as they may be, as impactful as they might be. Let me ask two quick questions if I might. Mr. Sesay, thank you for your testimony and for your advocacy on behalf of Americans like you who've experienced what you did in Sierra Leone and in Gambia. What have you learned in Baton Rouge about the local community's willingness to welcome refugees and the recognition of the value that you bring?

Mr. SESAY. Thank you so much, Senator, and thank you for reaffirming your commitment to the refugee resettlement process. There are so many that I can mention here that are alone my experience, not just in Baton Rouge, in Louisiana as a whole, and as I mentioned earlier, the challenges that I faced in adjusting to life.

And my family was able to overcome that with the generosity of wonderful and great Americans.

And I'll cite one example. When I got here, I prioritized learning English, my first priority. And I enrolled in the GED program. And through my first job as a custodian at the Louisiana State University College, LSU—I'm a Tiger fan—and there, I learned the American football. But my supervisor at that time—she's an American—adopted me as a son and showed me the different programs that are there at LSU being I was working there. And I was able to be at work and do my GED and got my GED. To get my GED means so much to me.

And then, the next step, the same lady encourages me to get to college. I enrolled in community college. My very first semester, I experienced one of—I would say it's a bittersweet when I faced with bullying and discrimination. Sometime, when we talked about bullying, we talked about students doing it to other students, but this was the professor. I came from a country where the tradition, you respect teachers and respect them. And I couldn't respond.

Instead of calling my name like everyone is calling it right here, Dauda, two syllable, or call my last name, Sesay, and as much as I showed the teacher how to pronounce my name—and I even said, "Okay. You know what? Dauda means David. Call me David."—but instead chooses to call me the slave boy, Kunta Kinte. This is where I felt most welcome when my fellow classmates stood up on my behalf and report that issue to the dean.

One day, I walk in class—I almost dropped out, and I know what that education meant to me, to become the first person in my family to get a college degree, something my dad invested so much before he was taken away. That's what it meant to me. I walked in that class, and I saw the dean and I saw my fellow students, and they said, "Dauda, don't be afraid. We already told the dean what happened."

And I looked over 20-plus students, one professor, and then they gave me a voice. And I learned that what is happening, some of the dangerous weight of it does not represent the whole of this country. And I saw that generosity firsthand. So if you ask me—and that's just one I wanted to share so many.

Senator COONS. Thank you very much. Thank you for your service. And thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the chance to question and participate. I look forward to working with both of you as we try to solve this challenging problem.

Chair PADILLA. Thank you, Senator Coons. Senator Klobuchar.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you very much, and happy birthday, Mr. Chairman. And I understand you chaired two Judiciary hearings today. You are quite busy. And Senator Cornyn, thank you, as well. My State, we are very proud of our long tradition of welcoming immigrants and refugees. Our State has the largest Somali and Oromo populations in the U.S., second largest Hmong population only to California, and the largest Liberian population, 30,000 Liberians in Minnesota.

Our State also has the lowest unemployment rate in the country. We have, per capita, one of the highest numbers of Fortune 500 companies, depending on the year, 17, 18, 19 of them, and so much of that. When you look at our country and who is running compa-

nies right now or starting companies and the numbers of people who won U.S. Nobel Laureates, you see immigrants and refugees throughout.

So I am obsessed with their workforce issue right now. I'm not going double down on that because I want to talk about the Afghan Adjustment Act. But without refugees and immigrants, we're not going to maintain the competitive edge that has helped us, and that's why I want to pass either comprehensive immigration reform or at least do something when it comes to the DREAMers and temporary status people and add that into the workforce permits, visas, work on the border combined.

I just believe that if we don't do something here, when I look at our rural hospitals and doctors that are from other countries, when I look at our hospitality industry, Ag industry, we need the workers. So that's where my mind is, but my heart is also with our refugees. And more than 75,000 Afghans who have taken refuge in our country, they're currently in limbo.

That's why Senator Graham, the Ranking Member of this Committee, and I joined forces with Senator Coons, Moran, Wicker—these are the lead Republicans on the Veterans Affairs and the Armed Services Committee—Blumenthal, Shaheen, Murkowski, and many other supporters are leading the effort to pass a bipartisan Afghan Adjustment Act to allow Afghans who undergo additional vetting, which is very important to a number of our co-sponsors that you see this as actually a plus, not only for our country, not only for our reputation in the world when half of them, at least, have letters from the Chief of Mission in Afghanistan for helping our military rather as translators, security, and the like, would have a streamlined pathway to a green card.

I know that, Mr. Canny, your organization as well as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, we have 40 organizations including the VFW and the American Legion supporting this bill. It's a huge priority of former President Bush. Can you talk about how our bipartisan Afghan Adjustment Act would help the more than 75,000 Afghans who are currently living in limbo?

Mr. CANNY. Sure. Thank you, Senator, and also for your leadership in this particular area. Every day that an Afghan who we evacuated into the country and did an excellent job, both our multiple Government agencies, our communities, and our nonprofits, including our own, who work together on the safe havens to welcome them, should be commended for that work.

At the same time, while we have these folks integrating into our societies and cities and counties, and finding work and starting lives, every day that they're not secure by having a path to citizenship, or at least a path to, you know, permanent residency in this country, they are living in an insecure environment, and it certainly has to be affecting their mental health. In fact, I'm sure it is. I talked to many of them. So, this Act is critical to securing their place in this country.

We cannot send these people back to Afghanistan. We know what's happening with the Taliban. I met many, many young women who were well educated from Afghanistan who came through the evacuation. They cannot go back to Afghanistan. There isn't enough legal assistance there to assist them. The passage of

this Act, I feel, is common sense and imperative to those who are here and to those tens of thousands that we hope to also bring forward from places like Pakistan, which we discussed earlier.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Very good. Well, thank you very much. And by the way, thank you for your personal story. And we are devoted to moving this bill ahead on behalf of those that have stood with our country. So, thank you.

Mr. CANNY. Thank you.

Chair PADILLA. Thank you, Senator Klobuchar. Senator Cornyn, let's proceed with the second round of questions. And I have a few more, and I imagine you might as well.

One aspect of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program that is particularly troubling is how long it can take someone to get through the entire referral and resettlement process—two different stages of it. These people are literally fleeing from wars, environmental disasters, and persecution, and yet it can still take years for them to find a new, safe home in the United States.

The State Department has set a goal to try and process and resettle refugees within 6 months from the time they are referred to the program, but currently, it's taken 3 to 4 years, sometimes longer. Mr. Sesay, you spent almost 10 years in a refugee camp waiting to be resettled. Can you just describe for the Committee what that experience with your time there in the refugee camp was like?

Mr. SESAY. Thank you so much, Senator Padilla, and thanks for this hearing today. As I mentioned earlier in my opening, life in the refugee camp is very tough. And I remember when I got into The Gambia and in the refugee camp right in Basse. The camp doesn't have any dedicated place to use when you wanted to go to the toilet. And sometime, we would wait at night for you to take a shower when it's dark. And you live in a space about the size of from here to there. You get over 10 to 20 people who lived in that space, and it's opened.

And the worst part, especially during the raining season, when it rains, imagine you go further down and you use it, a camp that is filled with people. And during raining season, all the smell, the toilet, it's coming back where individuals are living. And at that time, they are adjacent, not too far from the camp—there was war going on at Casamance by Senegal's border. So you run from a war and then close to the border, there's instability going. And then, the host nation, they already have their own situation. So, yes, this take us to some of the reason why you see individual are finding other ways to seek safety because of the conditions in the camp and the time it took.

Chair PADILLA. I'm sorry to interrupt, but there's another question I want to ask you. I appreciate you sharing because, again, I know it was not easy and it's still not easy, but for all the reasons we may think of how we can and should accelerate the time that it takes. The experiences that you're sharing should remind us or give us additional reason and motivation to move that process along more expeditiously. I asked you the question about what it was like while you were waiting.

I want to ask my next question of what it was like once you came to the United States. You shared some good stories, some not-so-

friendly stories about that time period of integrating, some welcoming families, an instructor who was not very proper. I'll leave it at that. What are some of the biggest integration barriers that you think that refugees face when they arrive into the United States, and how can the Federal Government address those barriers or challenges that when refugees do arrive, they integrate more quickly and successfully and can thrive more quickly?

Mr. SESAY. Thank you so much. And in my personal experience, the first thing is language barrier, communication, because it is key. And then also having a structure in place especially, those that come here with little children. Like, I came here with my wife and my daughter was 6 months old. Well, it takes away the family dynamics. If I had to go to work during the day, she looks at the child. And then, when I come home, she has to go to work.

Refugee like us, we wanted to give back in the community and we wanted to get to self-sufficiency, and I believe access to childcare, access to safe and affordable homes, access to an opportunity for you to go learn English, and then having childcare in the process, and I think that would go a long way to help us integrate and, at the same time, able to contribute back to the Nation that gave us this opportunity. And finally, I will say the refugee program, yes, needs to be protected. And then we saw within the last 5 years how that infrastructure has been damaged.

And I know personally in Louisiana, a career social worker that help refugees and others like us integrate, majority of those, they lose their job because of the low numbers that are coming up. And I believe that low number is so critical. And if Congress can pass either a bill or a legislation to have a minimum cap of the Presidential determination, that will help because once we have the minimum caps, we know when the number went to below 15,000 or 15,000, we saw how those infrastructure—in Louisiana, we have refugees resettlement stations that are closed.

Second, let's have an equitable pathway to protections. We all see what is happening in Ukraine, and then we saw the response of the administrations. That response can be leveraged across other nationality as well. What happened to me, it's similar that I'm seeing that is happening in Ukraine. What is happening in the DRC Congo is not that much different. What is happening in Ukraine, what happened to the Afghanistan is not different. What is happening in those other parts of the world, including Mali right now—and I believe that equitable pathway to protection will go a long way in protecting that infrastructure and the system.

Chair PADILLA. Thank you. And that's why we're here. How do we improve the system? I'll just note before recognizing Senator Cornyn for additional questions. It's a challenging enough for Federal, State, and local governments to help address the housing affordability concern. We recognize that it's particularly difficult for refugees' access to quality, affordable childcare—it's a concern for everybody, but again, particularly difficult for refugees. So we have a lot of work to do. Senator Cornyn.

Senator CORNYN. Mr. Canny, I believe it was in 2016 when you had previously testified about the small number of religious minorities subjected to persecution, that the role of these small number were resettled in the United States that fiscal year. And I believe

it was 2016, you said that you focused especially on the plight of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East, and of course, in my opening comments, I talked about the Uyghurs and the People's Republic of China, about a million Muslim Uyghurs who were essentially held in concentration camps.

The previous administration had an entire category of refugee admissions focused on victims of religious persecution. A recent article in the National Catholic Register described Nigeria, for example, as an epicenter of anti-Christian violence with 5,014 Christians killed in 2022 alone, nearly 90 percent of the total number of Christians killed worldwide. Do you think a category for religious persecution would be helpful as opposed to just a geographical or country approach?

Mr. CANNY. I think it's worthy to consider, but as we know, for the refugee admission at large, religious persecution is a category. I think what would be as important is to assure that our adjudication officers, this is part of their training, to be able to identify and be sensitive to religious persecution, as you note is happening in many places around the world, Christians and others alike. So I think that it's worth examining the category, but perhaps most importantly sensitizing our personnel that are out there adjudicating cases and keeping an eye on religious persecution as a specific category.

Senator CORNYN. General Burns, speaking of the Afghan Adjustment Act now, the Inspector General of both the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Defense have both published reports finding that during Operation Allies Welcome Afghans who were either not fully vetted or who were later found to have derogatory information, their background had been paroled into the United States. Do you think the manner in which Operation Allies Welcome was conducted could potentially pose a national security risk as opposed to having that vetting occur outside of the country?

General BURNS. Yes, I think it goes to my former comments on, we just have to have a consistent vetting process that's outside the country that goes through all that process. And I think what we need is, and hopefully it'll happen, is innovation occurs. We'll be able to start to integrate in the different systems between DHS, DOD, and everybody else as well to get to the speed, so that way you're not waiting a long time because we have to maintain security for stability. But we also have to need to pick it up a little bit and hopefully, innovation will do that.

And I think also, frankly, funding the right programs between CBP and the different agencies, so that way they can do it, because the size in these crises, unfortunately, keep happening. As you were commenting earlier about refugees, all I could think and hope for after 36 years of service is actually not having the best year of refugees coming out, that's not a good thing. I would like to see the lowest, and unfortunately, we don't have systems right now to vet to the depth that we need with the amount of refugees that we have as well as everybody else, but that was definitely a concern.

And again, it's that speed and security thing. We were in a very difficult situation in Afghanistan, getting people out, and we needed to kind of position someplace else and then migrate them in

after the rigorous vetting and having a standard process that we follow.

Senator CORNYN. And finally, Mr. Canny, you said you weren't familiar necessarily with the rule that the Biden administration is working on or promulgated for people claiming asylum, but I think generally speaking, it could be described as a way to encourage people to apply outside of the United States and not then have to wait in the interior of the United States for the process to conclude.

As you know, there was a Remain in Mexico protocol under the previous administration, but I can tell you based on the recent trip that Senator Welch and Senator Coons and I took to Mexico, they've got their own challenges because they can't accommodate a whole lot of people there. But they're happy to have them move on into the United States so they're out of their—they're no longer a concern of theirs.

But as a general matter, do you think it makes sense to vet asylees outside of the United States if it can be done so like applying through a consulate in their home country if that's possible?

Mr. CANNY. Well, then they would—yes, I do. They would then be refugees. They wouldn't be asylum seekers.

Senator CORNYN. Yes, that's another part of the confusing nomenclature here, because essentially, as I understand, the legal standard is virtually the same for refugees or asylees, but if you apply for the refugee program, you're subject to a cap in this vetting, and if you show up on our border and claim asylum, none of that applies. And I think the Biden administration is trying to figure out how do we deal with the humanitarian and public security crisis we have on our border. But again, to your point, they become refugees not asylees if they do it from their home country.

Mr. CANNY. I do believe that the more processing centers that we can put into the Southern Hemisphere to deal with some of these situations would be helpful to all involved, both for, you know, those who are leaving these countries so quickly and due to the situation. Haiti is a very good example. If we can get some refugee processing centers out there and go out and adjudicate along with keeping, you know, our international obligations and national obligations to welcome asylum seekers when they come to our border or to give them a chance, I think we can—I think we can do both better.

Senator CORNYN. We no doubt can do better than the status quo. Thank you so much. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chair PADILLA. Thank you, Senator Cornyn. One last question before we begin to adjourn here today. Coming back to Mr. Canny. Now, we hear from employers all the time that the labor market is tight and it is challenging for them to find workers. We have a workforce shortage in America. At the same time, the unemployment rate is currently at 3.6 percent, and refugees who are able to come to United States help fill an important labor shortage gap in communities across the United States and in a number of important sectors of our economy.

In fact, the 2017 study conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services found that refugees contributed \$269 billion in revenue between 2005 and 2014, with the net fiscal impact of \$63 billion, meaning that they generated more revenue for the

United States than the amount spent on them by the Government. I believe Senator Whitehouse referred to this data as well when he was present earlier.

Sure wish we would have heard more about that study that was conducted in 2017, but regardless, the data is the data. Again, there's a chart demonstrating this behind me. Question for Mr. Canny, in your experience leading one of the largest resettlement agencies in the United States, can you share your experience, how easy or difficult it is to assist refugees in finding employment and what recommendations you may have to help us help you help refugees?

Mr. CANNY. Historically, not difficult to help refugees find employment for a variety of reasons, largely because they come and they want to contribute and they want to work. The current program run by State Department and ORR puts a premium on refugees finding employment and puts a premium on the resettlement agencies. It's a primary goal to actually help them find employment. After some 60 days—90 days, excuse me—about 32 percent of refugees are employed after 8 months.

Our experience is that 80 percent of employable refugees are employed and they are employed to the extent that they can not only provide for themselves but be ineligible for public grants such as TANF. So after 8 months, 80 percent of the refugees that we work with find employment: various industries, agriculture, meat packing, retail. I just, again, as I frequently do, had a Uber ride from a refugee. And so, the ability to help them find work is there.

The one thing that I would say is we have to look for ways to follow them longer in their employability. In other words, not just get them their first job, but look at ways that we can help them develop their careers. So programs that can do that and again our refugee support tends to be a bit shorter than longer. Programs that can help them deal with English language, learn English for longer periods, and then develop their career over longer periods, I think would be beneficial to refugees and our communities.

Chair PADILLA. Thank you so much. I'll have to follow up on that topic and many others, but I think at this point, we'll begin to move towards adjournment of the hearing. But first, a couple of housekeeping items. Number one, you heard from a couple of my colleagues that, yes, today is my birthday.

[Laughter.]

Chair PADILLA. Last year, 1 year ago today, it was Day 1, if I recall, of the confirmation hearing for now-Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson. And my sons at the time said, "If you're not home for your birthday, Dad, you better have a good reason." I think we had a great reason last year. We have a very good reason here today. We will wait for the weekend to blow out some candles, but thank you all for your participation.

I do want to take this moment to enter a number of statements into the record, including statements from CHIRLA, from Church World Service, from HIAS, from the International Refugee Assistance Project, from Kids in Need of Defense, Lawyers for Good Government, from Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Service, from Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, from the National Immigration Forum, from the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and

Immigration, from Refugee Advocacy Lab, from Refugee Congress, from Refugees International, from Talent Beyond Boundaries, from the Episcopal Church, and from Voice for Refuge. Without objection, these statements will be included.

[The information appears as submissions for the record.]

Chair PADILLA. Also to announce to everybody, the record will close 1 week from today. I once again thank Ranking Member Cornyn and his staff, along with Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Graham, and their staff, as well as all of our fellow Committee Members for helping with the success of today's hearing. I thank again our witnesses for joining us today and for sharing your stories, your experience, and your expertise.

What we heard today should be a hopeful reminder of the opportunity that the United States of America still represents to millions around the globe, but should also be an urgent call to action because for all that our Nation represents, we are at risk of falling short of our ideals and our needs. We can see that while the number of refugees worldwide is skyrocketing, our Nation's admissions numbers have plummeted as a result of the policies of the prior administration, as well as due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet as we work to build back from COVID-19 and from the prior administration, the Biden administration is working hard to return to a standard fitting our Nation. And there should be no reason why we can't find common ground and ensure the refugee program has the resources it needs to fulfill its mission. I also want to take a moment to emphasize a distinction that we discussed several times during today's hearing. There is a U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, which was the focus of today's hearing. Separately, there's the asylum system.

Now, both programs are lifesaving programs, but they are separate and distinct, and both need our support to ensure that we can address the rise in displacement we are witnessing around the world, including for the 103 million who cannot safely return home. I do think it is important to underscore that refugees are one of the most thoroughly vetted groups of immigrants in the country. Another chart behind me, to help drive home the points, just a small flavor of the many, many steps, rigorous steps, that refugees go through before they can enter the United States.

[Poster is displayed.]

Chair PADILLA. I'll also acknowledge that a former National Security Council senior director for the Trump administration for a year and a half put it this way, and I'll quote, "I did used to think that the refugee program was vulnerable to terrorist infiltration, but then I got here and made it my business to learn the facts about the program. And now I know that refugees are the most vetted category of any immigrant," end quote. She went on to say, again I'll quote, "You'd be crazy to come if you were a terrorist. This is the last way you would try to get into this country," end quote. So this debate is not about security.

As a country, we've taken painstaking steps to ensure refugees are thoroughly vetted before entry. Instead, this discussion is about our ability to live up to our founding ideals and to welcome those in need with humanity. We can and must do better, better for peo-

ple just like Mr. Sesay, who have credible fear of persecution at home but must still wait years in a refugee camp fighting for better living conditions before they can ever reach their new home.

And we must do better for the many Americans who want to help in refugee resettlement efforts, who take their moral duty as Americans and as human beings seriously by trying to lift up and help refugees who dream of living free in the United States of America. I believe we can and must work together in a bipartisan way as has been done in the past to improve our immigration system so more people have the opportunity to utilize the refugee admissions process.

I thank you all, again, for your participation today, to our witnesses and to my colleagues for joining us. And with that, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:16 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

[Additional material submitted for the record follows.]

A P P E N D I X

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Witness List
Hearing before the
Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, & Border Safety

“Living Up to America’s Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program”

Wednesday, March 22, 2023
Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room 226
2:30 p.m.

William Canny
Executive Director, Migration and Refugee Services
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
Washington, D.C.

Dauda Sesay
National Network Director, African Community Together
Vice-Chair, Refugee Congress Board of Directors
Founder & President, Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants (LORI)
Baton Rouge, LA

BG Christopher M. Burns
U.S. Army (Ret.)

*Living Up to America's Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S.
Refugee Admissions Program*

Senate Judiciary Committee 22 MAR 2023

BG Christopher M. Burns US Army (Ret.) Testimony

*Chairman Padilla, Ranking Member Cornyn, and distinguished
Members of the subcommittee: It is an honor to appear before
you to discuss the Refugee Admissions Program.*

*My testimony today examines the current refugee challenges
through the lens of someone who has looked at this problem from
a whole-of-government approach as the former Commanding
General of Special Operations Command North and prior to
that as the Assistant Commanding General for Special
Operations Command Central. This experience includes 36
years of service to the nation experiencing refugee challenges
firsthand around the world.*

*My testimony today is my own opinion based on those years of
experience and does not represent the opinion or policy of
anyone else.*

*My goal today is to hopefully bring you a unique set of
perspectives and possible points to consider as you ponder the
path forward on this very challenging issue.*

The first portion of my testimony will focus on the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). USRAP has been around for some time and has shown to be an underutilized but effective program. It is thoughtfully designed and does the due diligence that is needed to ensure that the person claiming refugee status is indeed a valid entrant to the program—that is, that the applicants are truly persecuted on the basis of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, and that they do not pose a national security threat to the United States. The program allows the U.S. Government to manage through a deliberate process which in turn leads to the best-forecasted outcomes since it is a planned program. As noted, President Biden increased the number from 15,000 per year to 125,000 per year, although the Administration projected last year's admissions to be only 23,000 to 25,000. This committee has, on the whole, expressed support for helping victims of persecution through the Refugee Admission Program. I could not agree more that this is the right way to bring in refugees who have a strong desire to be U.S. citizens.

In contrast to the orderly, deliberate process of screening refugees through the USRAP, the current situation on the southern border poses a risk to our safety and national security. Many of the migrants who have crossed the border and claimed asylum do not meet those qualifications (the same standard that applies to refugees) and desire to enter the country for economic,

and medical reasons, are being trafficked as slaves, sex workers, organ harvesting, and drug mules/dealers, criminals, on a terrorist watch list, and cartel elements. There are other reasons, but the key point is that for most they are looking at what is the easiest way to enter the country. Some have noble reasons and some do not.

This has led to many refugees taking the “easy wrong” versus the “hard right” of the USRAP. Some are convinced by cartels that the cartels’ way is the best way because it is a cheaper process and they guarantee you will get in or they will cross you again. Some people are trafficked in and the cartels own them as they pay off the cost of entry. This factor, combined with the people who do not qualify for asylum, leads to a huge demand for the cartel model of entering the country.

The Biden Administration has announced its intent to triple refugee resettlement from the Western Hemisphere through the U.S. Refugee Admission Program. If we don’t take serious action to deter migrants from taking the wrong way, and placing their lot with the cartels, this approach will not have its intended result.

It is worth pointing out that these illicit pathways have existed for decades and the only thing that changes is the commodity that is passed through them. When I was SOCNORTH CDR we saw a lot of human trafficking because that was where the money

was. Drugs had declined because they had become less profitable than human trafficking. Fentanyl was just starting to rise and was a concern for us given the ease of production and movement that was on the horizon. I think a point that can be made is that the size of the breakage rate or seizure of drugs is in proportion to the amount coming across (i.e., a large seizure means more coming across on a net basis). The best approach is to look at the cartels as a business and they are going to move whatever commodity makes them the most money, and when that dries up they will look at other means to generate revenue just like a business. We are competing against a well-marketed program with global reach that is cheaper, faster and has a guarantee to deliver, and is highly adaptable.

So for our program to be the program that is selected we need to make it more attractive and also increase the difficulty of the illicit pathways. This will not be easy given the impressive track record the cartels have in getting people/commodities into the United States.

Some things to consider as you look to increase security on the southern border and protect people who are truly persecuted:

- 1. Vetting needs to happen outside the country to ensure the right people enter. Our system is not designed to quickly vet large numbers of migrants on the border for the veracity of*

their asylum claims and any potential criminal background and national security threat.

- 2. Understand it is a business for cartels, and whatever action you take they will counter to make money. That may be a different commodity or some action inside the U.S. that will generate revenue with those that are indebted to them. They are in business to make money.*
- 3. A lot of disinformation is fed to those who try to transit through our border.*
- 4. Innovation is taking away many lower entry-level jobs here in the United States. We need to bring in people who need our help but we can also provide the path to success for. (ie Amazon Market and McDonald's reduced their workforce due to technology replacing service roles.)*
- 5. The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different outcome. If the changes you make are working, you will see a decrease in illegal entries, and we will be able to offer refuge to the truly persecuted. If not, try something else and realize that you have a competitor for market share.*
- 6. From a global perspective, we need to make sure that failed states can get their national talent back and not keep them. If not, we will be creating an ungoverned space that various actors will exploit.*

I thank you for your time and look forward to any questions I might be able to answer.



Written Testimony of

WILLIAM CANNY

Executive Director, Migration and Refugee Services
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

For a Hearing of the

SENATE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION, CITIZENSHIP, & BORDER SAFETY

“Living Up to America’s Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program”

March 22, 2023

Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C.

Chairman Padilla, Ranking Member Cornyn, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to testify. My name is Bill Canny. I have had the privilege of leading Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) for the past seven years. During that period and over the course of my career, I have witnessed the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) at its highest and lowest points. With each, I have only grown in my appreciation for the program, its life-saving impact, and all those who work to make it one of the most successful humanitarian enterprises in human history.

Our country has a rich tradition of welcoming refugees, even before the creation of USRAP. For the purposes of this hearing, I will focus my remarks on the U.S. Catholic community's ongoing contributions to that legacy, the current state of resettlement, recent ad hoc resettlement efforts, and recommendations for bolstering the Refugee Admissions Program.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S COMMITMENT TO REFUGEES

In 1943, at the height of World War II, the Catholic bishops of the United States established War Relief Services (WRS) as the international humanitarian arm of the National Catholic Welfare Council, a precursor of the USCCB. WRS was entrusted with overseeing the U.S. Church's efforts to serve displaced persons abroad and to extend "help to war-afflicted people, especially children, on the basis of need alone, without reference to race, creed, or other factors."¹ The National Catholic Resettlement Council (NCRC) was subsequently created in 1947 to coordinate the Church's domestic reception and integration efforts. Just a year later, out of 119 Catholic dioceses in the United States at the time, 105 had a resettlement director appointed by the local bishop.² This laid the foundation for the USCCB's current resettlement network.

In the decades following the NCRC's creation, the U.S. Catholic community played a critical role in welcoming hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Soviet Union, Hungary, Vietnam, Cuba, and elsewhere. When MRS was created in 1965, it assumed responsibility for these efforts. By the mid-1970s, it had become apparent that the ad hoc nature of resettlement featured throughout most of the twentieth century was not sustainable.³ Congress standardized the process of resettlement when it established USRAP in 1980. The USCCB became one of the original resettlement agencies supporting the program. Historically, the USCCB has been the largest of these organizations. Our network, comprised mainly of Catholic Charities agencies, serves about 17% of those being resettled. MRS is also one of two national organizations partnering with the U.S. government to serve children through the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM) Program.

Since 2010, MRS has operated Parishes Organized to Welcome Immigrants and Refugees (POWIR), a privately funded community sponsorship and engagement program that has mobilized

¹ EILEEN EGAN, CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES: THE BEGINNING YEARS 16 (1988).

² Todd Scribner, "Pilgrims of the Night": The American Catholic Church Responds to the Post-World War II Displaced Persons Crisis, 124 AMERICAN CATHOLIC STUDIES 1, 14 (2013).

³ With each new refugee crisis, it became increasingly apparent that the executive and legislative branches favored differing approaches to refugee admissions. The extensive use of humanitarian parole by the executive was a notable source of conflict. See Deborah Anker, *The Refugee Act of 1980: An Historical Perspective*, 5 IN DEFENSE OF THE ALIEN 89, 90–92 (1982).

tens of thousands of volunteers from Catholic dioceses across the country to accompany newcomers. Through POWIR, refugees and other forcibly displaced populations are assisted with language acquisition, job coaching, housing, life skills, mentorship, and cultural orientation, thus improving their ability to achieve self-sufficiency and successfully integrate within American communities. During last year's project period (May 2021-May 2022), 23 POWIR sites collectively engaged over 2,700 local community organizations, guided over 6,600 volunteers, garnered \$8 million dollars in financial and in-kind donations from their host communities, and served over 12,500 newcomers.

Collectively, these efforts demonstrate the Catholic Church's longstanding commitment to welcoming newcomers and protecting the life and dignity of our most vulnerable brothers and sisters. Our work is motivated by the Gospel, which calls us to welcome the stranger as we would Christ and to see him in all those we serve.⁴ Echoing his predecessors, Pope Francis has been a steadfast advocate of those fleeing persecution, violence, and natural disasters. Throughout his pontificate, he has often spoken about the causes of forced displacement and its challenges, while underscoring the abundant contributions of refugees to the social and economic growth of welcoming communities, especially when "optimized and supported by carefully developed programs and initiatives."⁵

FOUR DECADES OF USRAP

Much about our country and our world has changed since 1980, but the Refugee Admissions Program remains true to its roots: an expansive public-private partnership, supported by a diverse group of faith-based organizations, representing the Catholic, Jewish, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Evangelical traditions, alongside a number of secular partners. Local agencies and communities across 48 states—from Providence to Houston and Salt Lake City to Sacramento—play a crucial role in welcoming refugees. Meanwhile, those resettled through USRAP continue to be some of the most vulnerable and the most vetted refugees in the world.

Once resettled, these refugees make meaningful contributions to their new communities, including through economic impact. Upon their arrival in the United States, many refugees are eager to begin working to support themselves and their families. On average, refugees work at the same or a higher rate when compared to those born in the United States. Male refugees overall have been shown to have a higher employment rate than their U.S.-born counterparts (67% versus 60%), and female refugees are just as likely as native-born women to be employed.⁶ Many also become entrepreneurs, generating new jobs for the American economy. In 2015, over 181,000 refugee entrepreneurs generated \$4.6 billion in business income.⁷ That same year, refugees are estimated to have contributed \$20.9 billion in federal, state, and local taxes.⁸ With respect to public benefits,

⁴ Matthew 25:31–46.

⁵ Pope Francis, Message for the 108th World Day of Migrants and Refugees (2022), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/20220509-world-migrants-day-2022.html>.

⁶ RANDY CAPPS, ET AL., THE INTEGRATION OUTCOMES OF U.S. REFUGEES: SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES 16 (2015), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/UsRefugeeOutcomes-FINALWEB.pdf>.

⁷ NEW AMERICAN ECONOMY, FROM STRUGGLE TO RESILIENCE: THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF REFUGEES IN AMERICA 10 (June 2017), <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/from-struggle-to-resilience-the-economic-impact-of-refugees-in-america/>.

⁸ *Id.*

refugees who enter the country between the ages of 18 and 45 pay an estimated \$21,000 more in taxes than they receive in benefits over a 20-year period.⁹

In 2020, we commemorated the fortieth anniversary of the Refugee Admissions Program. Unfortunately, one year later, we observed another milestone—an all-time low number of annual admissions, with just over 11,400 refugees admitted that year.¹⁰ This pales in comparison to the historical average of about 80,000 annual admissions,¹¹ spanning both Republican and Democratic administrations. In large part, this decline can be attributed to policies put in place by the prior administration, combined with the devastating toll of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in 2020, the Presidential Determination (PD) was set at 18,000 admissions, the lowest in the program's history. This had already followed a temporary prohibition on refugee admissions and three consecutive years of historically low PDs, resulting in significant cuts to staffing and processing infrastructure, as well as the closure of hundreds of local resettlement offices.¹² Beyond the harms inflicted on USRAP itself, this sharp decline in refugee admissions is estimated to have cost the U.S. economy \$9.1 billion per year since 2017.¹³

However, USRAP and those who support its operation, across both government and civil society, have demonstrated a strong resolve and a capacity to adapt. There is perhaps no better illustration of this than the herculean effort undertaken by the resettlement community to welcome almost 80,000 Afghans over the span of a few months in 2021 and 2022.

RECENT AD HOC RESETTLEMENT EFFORTS

Over the past two years, the United States has welcomed multiple groups of forcibly displaced persons outside of the typical USRAP process, relying on the more streamlined mechanism of humanitarian parole. Found in section 212(d)(5) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, humanitarian parole is a discretionary benefit granted by the Secretary of Homeland Security, which allows an individual to temporarily enter and reside in the United States for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit.¹⁴ There are important distinctions between refugee status and humanitarian parole, especially regarding access to resettlement services and long-term integration. While parole remains an important tool, particularly given the current limitations of USRAP in rapidly responding to unforeseen humanitarian crises, it is not an adequate substitute for refugee status, nor should it be used at the expense of USRAP. Moreover, a lack of uniform standards for granting parole and disparities between parole programs recently established for different nationalities raises significant concerns about equity.

⁹ William Evans & Daniel Fitzgerald, THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL OUTCOMES OF REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES: EVIDENCE FROM THE ACS 7 (2017), https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w23498/w23498.pdf.

¹⁰ Migration Policy Institute, *U.S. Annual Refugee Resettlement Ceilings and Number of Refugees Admitted, 1980-Present*, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-refugee-resettlement>.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Julie Watson, *Broken by Trump, U.S. Refugee Program Aims to Return Stronger*, Associated Press (Jan. 27, 2021), <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-politics-immigration-coronavirus-pandemic-0a649290b8a6628900598d4324c3d72b>.

¹³ MICHAEL A. CLEMENS, THE ECONOMIC AND FISCAL EFFECTS ON THE UNITED STATES FROM REDUCED NUMBERS OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS 2 (2022), <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/economic-and-fiscal-effects-united-states-reduced-numbers-refugees-and-asylum-seekers.pdf>.

¹⁴ 8 U.S.C. § 1182(d)(5).

Operation Allies Welcome

The USCCB was among those first called upon to welcome vulnerable Afghans who supported the U.S. mission and their families when they were relocated to the United States in the weeks leading up to, and directly following, our country's withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. We worked side by side with the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, and State, other government agencies, and a host of civil society partners to stabilize the evacuated Afghans at Safe Havens. This effort, dubbed Operation Allies Welcome, presented a massive challenge for the entire resettlement community, following what was already a difficult and unprecedented period for USRAP. Nevertheless, staff, volunteers, and communities quickly mobilized to meet this challenge. The USCCB's network has since resettled over 13,000 of these newcomers.

In September of 2021, Congress specifically authorized these Afghan humanitarian parolees to receive substantially the same services and benefits available to those with refugee status, with the noteworthy exception of a direct pathway to permanent legal status.¹⁵ While many of these Afghans have already become integral members of their new communities, as parolees, they lack the legal certainty typically provided to those with refugee status. There remains an urgent need for Congress to pass the Afghan Adjustment Act to establish a direct pathway to permanent protection and full legal integration for members of this population.

Uniting for Ukraine

Uniting for Ukraine (U4U) was launched in April of 2022 as part of the Biden Administration's commitment to welcome those displaced by the war in Ukraine. While also utilizing humanitarian parole, U4U requires each beneficiary to have a U.S.-based supporter who agrees to provide them with financial support for the duration of their stay in the United States. To date, more than 200,000 applications have been filed for individual Ukrainians by U.S.-based supporters, and over 150,000 of these Ukrainians having been approved to enter the country. Congress also authorized these humanitarian parolees to receive many of the same services and benefits available to those with refugee status, though they still lack a direct pathway to permanent legal status.¹⁶

THE FUTURE OF USRAP

In many ways, the Refugee Admissions Program stands at a crossroads. The program has been slow to restaff and rebuild processing infrastructure, and significant case backlogs continue to delay resettlement and family reunification. So far this fiscal year, out of a possible 125,000 admissions, based on the PD for FY 2023, less than 15,000 refugees have been admitted to the United States, excluding Afghan and Ukrainian parolees who are also being served by resettlement agencies.¹⁷ Of particular concern for the USCCB is the processing of Priority 3 (P-3) family reunification cases, which can take eight years or more to complete due to additional verification requirements. Moreover, a lack of urgency and transparency in processing Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) cases resettled through USRAP has caused thousands of Afghans who

¹⁵ Afghanistan Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2022, Pub. L. 117-43.

¹⁶ Additional Ukraine Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2022, Pub. L. 117-128.

¹⁷ REFUGEE PROCESSING CENTER, REFUGEE ADMISSIONS REPORT AS OF FEBRUARY 28, 2023, <https://www.wrapsnet.org/documents/PRM%20Refugee%20Admissions%20Report%20as%20of%2028%20Feb%202023.xlsx>.

provided faithful service to our country to be left behind and increasingly vulnerable to persecution precisely because of the assistance they provided.¹⁸ Not only do these issues inhibit access to life-saving protection and resettlement for qualified individuals, they hinder USRAP's role as a vital foreign policy tool that advances U.S. interests and national security objectives.

That said, there is much opportunity to innovate and improve efficiency within the program. The current administration has made some steps forward in this regard, including the use of concurrent processing, data-driven backlog reduction, and the launch of Welcome Corps. Improvements and expansion of the program are especially important if we are to leverage the more stable and reliable refugee status over temporary pathways, such as humanitarian parole. However, this will require Congress' continued commitment, oversight, and investment.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BOLSTERING REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

To safeguard our nation's proud tradition of resettling refugees and providing humanitarian protection to those in need, we offer the following recommendations to Congress:

1. **Through robust oversight and consultation, encourage the Administration to reach a monthly arrival rate consistent with 125,000 annual refugee admissions by the end of FY 2023:** Congress has always had an integral role in overseeing and contributing to the operation of USRAP, especially through the mandatory annual consultation process. We encourage Congress to exercise its oversight responsibility throughout the remainder of this fiscal year, pressing the Administration to continue to find ways to better leverage technology, streamline processing, and reduce inefficiencies in the vetting process. As aptly illustrated these past two years, it is in the national interest to have a more agile and effective resettlement program that can respond to sudden crises and scale in times of need. While thorough vetting is crucial for ensuring the integrity of USRAP, it should be carried out in a manner that is fair, meaningful, and efficient. Family reunification, further improving employment outcomes, and increasing the long-term success of all populations served, including through increased service periods, should be prioritized.
2. **Uphold existing humanitarian protections enshrined in U.S. and international law:** In addition to resettlement through USRAP, asylum is an equally important mechanism for humanitarian protection and access to asylum should be preserved. We urge Congress to reject legislation that would rollback existing humanitarian protections and to utilize its oversight authority to discourage the Administration from taking actions that curtail asylum access or undermine due process for those seeking protection. The USCCB has also previously supported proposed legislative reforms to expand relief for displaced persons and increase transparency in USRAP, such as those included in the Refugee Protection Act and the GRACE Act, measures introduced during prior congresses.
3. **Provide needed funding for processing, integration, and foreign assistance:** To maintain recent progress in rebuilding our nation's resettlement capacity, especially in response to Operation Allies Welcome and Uniting for Ukraine, and to further these gains,

¹⁸ Jack Detsch & Robbie Gramer, *Afghan Special Immigrant Visas Surge Amid Taliban Crackdown*, FOREIGN POLICY (Mar. 8, 2023), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/08/afghanistan-special-immigrant-visa-biden-taliban-crackdown/>.

Congress must continue to make adequate investments in USRAP. In addition to funding needed to carry out domestic resettlement and integration services, namely those provided through the Refugee and Entrant Assistance (REA) account of the Department of Health and Human Services, we also call on Congress to appropriate robust funding for the Department of State's Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA), International Disaster Assistance (IDA), and Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA) accounts. These accounts support the overseas processing component of USRAP, as well as efforts to minimize forced displacement and improve conditions in host countries, increasing opportunities for displaced persons to succeed in their original countries of asylum and reducing the need for third-country resettlement. Moreover, we urge Congress to continue providing direct appropriations to the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to support backlog reduction and processing carried out by USCIS, not only for the benefit of refugees and asylum seekers but all populations served by the agency. Strategic investment in overseas adjudication is especially needed.

4. **Prioritize the use of USRAP as a more durable and equitable mechanism for humanitarian protection, when possible, rather than temporary protections:** Congress should support a greater use of USRAP for populations in need. This includes the Administration's stated goal of increasing access to USRAP in Latin America. However, when the use of humanitarian parole or other temporary measures is necessitated, Congress and the Administration should work together to ensure beneficiaries have access to support services and long-term integration, including a realistic pathway to permanent legal status.
5. **Enact the bipartisan Afghan Adjustment Act:** Afghans recently resettled in the United States deserve a legal pathway to real and lasting safety, which Congress should provide without further delay. In addition to facilitating the full integration of Afghans already in the United States, the Afghan Adjustment Act would improve processing and expand access to the SIV program for those who supported our country, while also helping Congress to hold the Administration accountable.

CONCLUSION

Early on in his presidency, Ronald Reagan described refugee policy as "an important part of our past and fundamental to our national interest."¹⁹ President Reagan recognized that in resettling refugees we further our reputation as a nation of opportunity, a beacon of hope, and an adversary of oppression, while at the same time advancing our national security and foreign policy objectives. Over the past forty years, a strong bipartisan majority of Congress has shared this view. With record levels of forced displacement around the globe, it is my hope and prayer that you will join with communities across our country in supporting, preserving, and strengthening this program for the next forty years and beyond.

As always, the USCCB stands ready to work with Congress and the Administration to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate newcomers, especially those fleeing violence, persecution, and other affronts to human dignity.

¹⁹ President Ronald Reagan, Statement on United States Immigration and Refugee Policy (July 30, 1981), <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/statement-united-states-immigration-and-refugee-policy>.

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF DAUDA SESAY
NATIONAL NETWORK DIRECTOR, AFRICAN COMMUNITIES TOGETHER
VICE CHAIR, BOARD OF DIRECTORS, REFUGEE CONGRESS**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and the honorable members of the Judiciary Committee, I humbly greet you and thank you for holding this crucial and timely hearing. My name is Dauda Sesay, and I am a husband and a father of five lovely children. My wife, daughter and I were resettled to the United States as refugees from Sierra Leone in 2009. I am deeply honored for the opportunity to testify before this Subcommittee because of my personal connection to the refugee resettlement program, and to express my gratitude to my fellow Americans for welcoming me, giving me and my family a second chance at life and so many others like me to this country.

Today's hearing comes at a time when we are experiencing the worst humanitarian crisis in history. According to UNHCR, over 100 million people are forced to flee their homes and about 26 million of those are refugees, which roughly equates to 2 people every 3 seconds. By the time I finish with my five-minute opening, over 200 people somewhere around the world are likely to become a refugee. I just want you to consider who those numbers represent - they represent human lives - men, women, and children – like my family and me.

Our nation has a long-standing tradition of welcoming individuals/families seeking safety. Americans of all walks of life have shown compassion and welcomed refugees. My family experienced that welcome when Louisianians helped us settle in our new home. I remember during my first semester in college, I was being bullied and called names like 'Kunta Kinteh,' 'Slave boy.' During those difficult moments, I saw the true generosity of my fellow Americans, who stood up for me. A [poll released](#) just two months ago found that more than two-thirds of American voters across the country from different races, cultural backgrounds, education, and political affiliation, believe strongly that the U.S. should continue to have a refugee resettlement program. Unsurprisingly, that number climbed to 89% when asked if people personally know a refugee - someone like me.

Let me tell you a little bit about why I have a personal connection to this lifesaving program.

In the early 1990s, my home country, Sierra Leone, was violently attacked in one of the bloodiest civil wars in history, resulting in over [70,000 people killed](#) and almost 2.5 million displaced. This is a nation that had a population of about 4.5 million at the time. That war was characterized by widespread atrocities, including amputations (as young as three years old), girls and women were subjected to sexual violence, pregnant women undergoing brutal stillbirths, and families burnt alive - and these are just a few examples. So many children like me had to endure these cruel and tragic atrocities.

At a young age, like any other teenager, I had aspirations and dreams for who and what I wanted to be. I wanted to study medicine and become a gynecologist or a pediatrician because my country had, and continues to have, one of the [highest infant mortality rates in the world](#). All my

aspirational goals were shattered when I was forced to leave everything behind after armed rebels attacked my hometown.

On that day, after school, I remember playing with my friends outside my father's work complex, waiting for our parents, when armed rebels attacked. There were gunshots everywhere, and armed men stormed the complex, captured nine of us, and placed us in line for our hands to be chopped off using the slogan "do you want a long sleeve or short sleeve?"

In unspeakable horror, I watched five of my childhood friends' hands get amputated, a portion of my hand was almost cut off, and I got shot in my left leg. My father came out pleading for our release, but sadly and painfully, he was killed before me. My father - a true hero - died in front of me as he gave his precious life to protect us and what was left of our community.

When I later regained consciousness in an internally displaced camp, I learned that my family's house was set on fire with my mom, siblings, and other relatives inside. My mum survived the horror, but horrifically, my 7-year-old baby sister was burned alive - a sad and painful fact I learned decades later when I reconnected with my mom in 2014. I remembered during our conversation, my mother said to me, "I am hopeful that I will see my husband - that the same fate that brought us together, would be the same fate that would bring him back." I realized then that she didn't know that dad was killed. I had to be the one to tell her this sad news.

Like many refugees, I would have preferred to remain in my homeland. However, due to the constant fear of persecution, the brutal war that took away my loved ones, and the direct target to my family because of my father's traditional title, I had no other choice but to flee. We spent days in the bush, ate raw leaves to survive, and others drank their urine before I finally got into a 10-wheeler truck that passed through Guinea to Basse, in the Gambia. Due to my deteriorating health condition, I was transferred to the capital Banjul for medical treatment. After a few months at the hospital, I was so traumatized, crying and murmuring in Temne, my local language. One day a young lady walked up to me and greeted me in my local language, "Ndereh," meaning "Good morning." Words alone could not express the feeling of hearing someone speak my local language to me for the first time since I was admitted to the hospital. From that day forward, I had a family to adopt me and look after my wellbeing, and with it, a renewed feeling of finding a home, a family. A few years later, the family bond strengthened, and now, that young lady who greeted me at the hospital is my wife and together we are raising five lovely children.

Conditions in the refugee camp were extremely tough. We lived in a plastic tent crowded in one big space with no dedicated bathroom. We had to wait at night to shower and went into the bush to defecate. During the rainy season, most of the feces we deposited in the bush came through the broken tents. We faced another challenge with water-borne diseases.

As one of the fortunate refugees considered for resettlement, we had to undergo many background checks, first from the host country, then the UNHCR office and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and finally, the United States Department of Homeland Security, and other U.S. Agencies. I spent almost ten years in a refugee camp, even with my

medical condition, before I was finally resettled to the United States. The screening process was vigorous – and there were no shortcuts.

Once I came to the United States, even though I faced post-resettlement challenges - such as discrimination, bullying, and learning a new language and new way of life, and a new culture, I was determined to further my education, and to get a good job to provide for my wife and my young daughter. I enrolled in college, earned an associate's degree in Applied Science in Process Technology, and worked at Dow Chemical for over seven years. What made the most significant difference in overcoming these hardships, healing from past traumas, and earning a college degree was the welcome I received when I joined my new community in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Today, I work with refugees and immigrants as the National Network Director at [African Communities Together](#). A national organization that empowers African Immigrants to advance economically, integrate socially, and engage civically. I also founded the [Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants](#) (LORI) to assist refugees and immigrants throughout their various stages of integration to become self-reliant. I am also the Vice Chair of the Board of Directors at [Refugee Congress](#).

In my work, I see firsthand that the resettlement program faces severe challenges as it struggles to regain capacity, while unprecedented community support has helped fill the gap. A [recent report](#) from Refugee Congress, Refugee Council USA, and ECDC, concluded that a variety of factors contribute to how well refugees become integrated into their new communities - English language acquisition, access to education and professional development, and access to case management services during the first critical year when refugees arrive in the U.S.

The life-saving refugee resettlement has deep value to the cultural, humanitarian, and economic fabric of the U.S. As I continue to reflect on my journey, I appreciate the welcome I received and the unique community I have been able to build in Louisiana and across the United States. I believe Congress should act in a way that reflects the values of the vast majority of Americans who want to welcome refugees and other immigrants seeking safety. Like so many refugees who resettle in the U.S., we not only welcome others who are seeking protection, but we also create safe and vibrant communities that are welcoming and inclusive.

Because the U.S. allowed us to rebuild our lives, we take every opportunity to give back to the U.S. For instance, during the height of the Covid 19 pandemic, the Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants hosted ten community vaccination events and provided food and basic household goods to over 300 local families during Hurricanes Ida and Isaac. Across the U.S. refugee doctors and nurses [risked their lives](#) to keep communities safe and healthy. Given the barriers many refugees and immigrants face in having their medical degrees recognized in the U.S., they still chose to serve our communities - as volunteers. That is why I commend Congress for passing the bipartisan [Bridging the Gap for New Americans Act](#) last fall, which requires the U.S. Department of Labor to study employment barriers for immigrants and refugees with international credentials.

In 2017, an [internal study](#) from the Department of Health and Human Services found that refugees over a ten year period “contributed an estimated \$269.1 billion in revenues to all levels of government” and that “the net fiscal impact of refugees was positive over the 10-year period, at \$63 billion.” Refugees are also innovators and job creators. A study from the [New American Economy](#) that same year found that the businesses of refugees generated \$4.6 billion in business income during a single year - 2015.

Refugees also revitalize cities and towns by offsetting population decline and boosting economic growth nationwide by opening businesses, paying taxes, and buying homes. Many businesses would go under without refugee employees. Don’t just take my word for it. As Mayor of Utica, NY Robert Palmieri notes: “We’ve had a rebirth into some of our older neighborhoods that were starting to decay. Refugees have come in here and revitalized them and made them a proud neighborhood once again.”

The value and necessity of the refugee resettlement program is clear, but it also requires your renewed commitment and investment.

Now is the time for Congress to reaffirm the U.S.’ commitment to refugee resettlement by (1) exerting oversight over the Administration’s operations of the resettlement program to welcome more refugees, (2) investing resources that support refugees and the communities that welcome them, (3) strengthening and expanding refugee and asylum processing mechanisms, including expansion of equitable pathways for individuals and families seeking protection, and (4) passing bipartisan legislation such as the Afghan Adjustment Act, or the Refugee Protection Act, both of which will be reintroduced later this year.

In conclusion, I wanted to thank you once again for the opportunity to share my lived experience and offer a few recommendations to help you make an informed decision. The majority of Americans want to welcome refugees. Finally, if my story and the stories of so many other refugees make you feel compassion, I ask that you turn your compassion into action and save the critical lifesaving refugee resettlement program.

Thank you. May God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America.

Dauda Sesay

PRESIDENTS' | ON HIGHER EDUCATION
ALLIANCE AND IMMIGRATION

Statement for the Record of

Miriam Feldblum

Executive Director, Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration

Laura Wagner

Director of Refugee Student Initiatives, Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration

Jill Welch

Senior Policy Advisor, Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration

Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship & Border Safety
hearing on

“Living Up to America’s Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.”

Wednesday, March 22nd, 2023

2:30 p.m ET

Dirksen Senate Office Building Room 226

I. ABOUT THE PRESIDENTS' ALLIANCE

The nonpartisan, nonprofit [Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration](https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/policy/expanding-refugee-access-to-in-state-tuition/) brings college and university presidents and chancellors together on the immigration issues that impact higher education, our students, campuses, communities, and the nation. We work to advance just, forward-looking immigration policies and practices at the federal, state, and campus levels that are consistent with our heritage as a nation of immigrants and the academic values of equity and openness. The Alliance is composed of over 550 presidents and chancellors of public and private colleges and universities, enrolling over five million students in 43 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico.

II. HIGHER EDUCATION AND REFUGEES

As the United States works to rebuild its refugee resettlement program, there is an urgent need to expand access to higher education to refugee students.

We urge Congress to support a refugee resettlement program that can lead in a world of historic and rising displacement and hold the Biden administration accountable to fully restore and strengthen the U.S. resettlement program.

Congress must use this moment to conduct needed oversight to ensure as many refugees as possible are resettled this year. The FY 2023 refugee admissions goal was set at 125,000 but with fewer than 13,000 refugees resettled in the first five months of the fiscal year, it is imperative that Congress push for the needed reforms that expand the number of refugees we help find lasting protection. This includes **supporting robust federal funding for refugees and other forcibly displaced persons.** Congress must provide robust funding for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (State/PRM), the Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS/ORR), U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS Humanitarian Programs), and related accounts to fully rebuild capacity for refugee resettlement and help refugees to integration and thrive. Higher education institutions are expanding their capacity and stand ready to leverage their expertise to support the resettlement and integration of refugees.

Enact pro-refugee legislation that has a positive impact on people's lives and our local communities. We urge Members of Congress to reintroduce, support, and cosponsor bills that would restore and expand permanent protections for refugees, improve overseas assistance and refugee processing, and allow refugees to thrive in communities, such as the Afghan Adjustment Act and the To Offer Refugees College Help (TORCH) Act.

There also is a pressing need to lower the barriers for forcibly displaced and refugee students to access in-state tuition and financial assistance. Currently, only a limited number of states have passed legislation and policies to expand access to in-state tuition to individuals with refugee and other humanitarian statuses.¹ Congress and the administration should advance policies that are inclusive, equitable, and durable. Although these financial issues are decided at the state-level, Congress and the administration can help to raise awareness of the need for more states to follow good practices adopted by other states.

Current U.S. immigration policy actively excludes refugees from accessing higher education. Globally, only about six percent of college-aged refugees in the world are able to access higher education.² In the United States, F-1 visa requirements make these visas

¹ Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, "Expanding Refugee Access to in-State Tuition," accessed June 13, 2022, <https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/policy/expanding-refugee-access-to-in-state-tuition/>.

² U.N. Commission on Human Rights, "Tertiary Education," accessed June 13, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/tertiary-education.html>.

inaccessible to most refugees and displaced students.³ Refugee students generally cannot demonstrate an intent not to abandon their foreign residence, which is a requirement for non-immigrant visas under outdated provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act. By definition, refugees have fled their country of origin and cannot return due to fear of persecution.⁴

Helpfully, the U.S. Department of State has issued guidance for F-1 and M-1 students to help clarify the intent to depart and residence abroad requirements for the visas.⁵ The guidance states that student visa applicants must possess a present intent to depart the United States at the conclusion of their approved activities. The guidance also states that such intentions may change, and this is not a sufficient reason to deny a visa. Further, the present intent to depart does not imply a need to return to the country from which they hold a passport; it only means that they must intend to leave the United States upon completion of studies.

But even with this guidance, refugee students still face a significant hurdle in proving their intent to depart the United States. Additionally, these students may face difficulties proving that they have sufficient funds to support themselves and find the work policies for F-1 visa holders to be too restrictive.⁶ This has a negative impact on campuses' ability to recruit and retain top talent.⁷ A legislative change is needed to modernize immigration law to accommodate not only the possibility but indeed the intention for international students, including those who are forcibly displaced, to remain permanently in the United States after graduation.

We are heartened with the administrations' movement on [Welcome Corps](#), and the forthcoming launch of college and university sponsorship of refugee students, by using the new P-4 category in refugee admissions,⁸ and encourage Congressional support of these initiatives. Expanding access to higher education for refugee students (1) creates an education pathway, increasing the number of refugee students who can pursue a degree overall, (2) leverages the skills and talents of refugees both in the United States and abroad, and (3) enriches the diversity of campuses, expanding the perspectives of all students. Since the creation of the federal refugee resettlement program in 1980, there has not been a systematic mechanism for universities to sponsor refugees. Currently, small numbers of refugee students make their way to the United States to study. College and university sponsorship of refugee students will allow U.S. higher education institutions to access a part of the global talent pool that is currently challenging to reach due to a lack of viable immigration pathways. The crisis in Afghanistan and Ukraine illuminated the vast will of higher education institutions to

³ International Refugee Assistance Project, "Expanding Complementary Pathways for Refugees and Displaced Persons: A Blueprint for the U.S. Government," November 20, 2020, <https://refugeerights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Expanding-Complementary-Pathways-for-Refugees-and-Displaced-Persons-A-Blueprint-for-the-U.S.-Government.pdf>.

⁴ INA 101(a)(42).

⁵ 9 FAM 402.5-5(E)(1), available at <https://fam.state.gov/fam/09FAM/09FAM040205.html>.

⁶ Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, "University Sponsorship"; International Refugee Assistance Project, "Expanding Complementary Pathways."

⁷ See, e.g. Rachel Rosenthal, "The STEM Graduate System Is Broken. Here's How to Fix It," *Bloomberg Opinion*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2021-opinion-optional-practical-training-problems-stem-graduates-deserve-better-jobs-opportunities/>.

⁸ Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, *University Sponsorship of Refugee Students: Initiative on Increasing U.S. Education Pathways for Refugee Students*, November 2021, https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/effective_practice/report-the-initiative-on-u-s-education-pathways-for-refugee-students/.

welcome and enroll students facing displacement, but also the policy barriers that disincentivize both institutions and refugee students from enrollment.

III. CLOSING

Refugees are key to the vitality of higher education in the United States, our national economy, and future innovation. It is imperative that Congress open educational and career pathways for all students. Currently, legislative barriers prevent many refugee students from pursuing their education and career goals. By eliminating these barriers and expanding opportunities, Congress can ensure the future academic and career success of these student populations, the future vibrancy and sustainability of the colleges and universities that educate them, and the future prosperity and vitality of the communities across our nation that benefit from their contributions and dedication.



March 22, 2023

Chair Alex Padilla
Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Safety
Washington, DC 20515

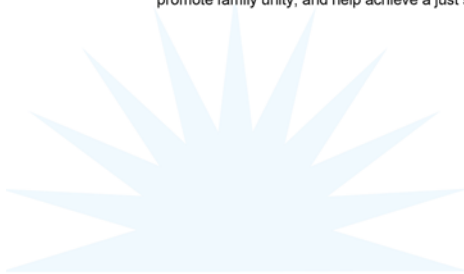
Ranking Member John Cornyn
Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Safety
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Hearing "Living Up to America's Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program"
Wednesday, March 22, 2023; 2:30pm
Dirksen Senate Office Building Room 226

Dear Chair Padilla and Ranking Member Cornyn:

On behalf of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA), the largest statewide immigrant rights organization in California, I submit this statement for the record for today's hearing entitled "***Living Up to America's Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.***"

As an organization serving the immigrant community for the past 35 years, CHIRLA has worked to gain and maintain both trust and credibility as a reliable source of accurate information of events both in California and south of the U.S. – Mexico border. We strive to ensure that federal policies protect immigrants, promote family unity, and help achieve a just society fully inclusive of immigrants.





CHIRLA's Work with Refugees

CHIRLA is currently a member of the [Welcome with Dignity](#) campaign, which is focused on safeguarding the right to seek asylum and "strengthening U.S. leadership on protecting refugees." Additionally, through the National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA), CHIRLA is part of the [We Are All America](#) campaign "to uphold and strengthen our nation's commitment to welcome and protect those seeking freedom, safety and refuge in the United States."

Since 2017, CHIRLA has expanded its advocacy efforts for refugees and the refugee resettlement system to ensure that the U.S. can continue its legacy of being a beacon of hope and security for those fleeing persecution and war-torn countries. CHIRLA has successfully fought for state investments that serve refugee, asylee, and humanitarian populations in the state of California and provided rapid-response navigation services for newly arrived Afghans who arrived through the Operation Allies Welcome (OAW) program. CHIRLA consistently advocates for equitable resettlement and services for all newcomers seeking safe-haven and security in the U.S.

Biden Administration Policies

The Biden Administration has set laudable goals for accepting some 125,000 per fiscal year, and the Fiscal 2024 budget request reflects this.¹ However, as confirmed by the State Department run Refugee Processing Center, these goals are far from being met:

In September 2022, President Biden set the refugee admissions ceiling for FY 2023 at 125,000. (FY 2022: 125,000; FY 2021: 15,000 increased to 62,500 several months after President Biden took office). However, actual

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/briefing-room/2023/03/09/fact-sheet-president-bidens-budget-strengthens-border-security-enhances-legal-pathways-and-provides-resources-to-enforce-our-immigration-laws>.





resettlement has continued to fall far short of these admissions ceilings. More than a third of the way through the fiscal year, resettlement data suggests we're on track to resettle just 27,700 total refugees in FY 2023 – although monthly arrivals are expected to increase in the second half of the fiscal year.²

There are some signs that the Administration is trying new, creative ways to meet these goals. In addition to meeting numerical goals, however, it is essential that any successes in that direction are achieved equitably.

On that note, CHIRLA is concerned about the current use of the vetting process, the targeting of certain countries of origin for refugee status, the implementation of new Welcome Corps and finally, ORR's current focal points. **The concern is that refugees from some countries, many stuck in camps for a long time, would find themselves waiting longer as others are prioritized to meet certain policy goals or because they are neater fits for the new solutions.**

Vetting Process

Before a refugee can be assisted by the Department of State in reaching the U.S., the National Vetting Center at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) must conduct background investigations and more.

As with much of the federal government's immigration functions, DHS' United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has been deeply impacted by the global pandemic and the continuing affects of efforts of the previous Administration to limit all forms of immigration. According to the USCIS FY23-26 strategic plan, the agency was able to interview some 6,250 Afghan refugee applicants in FY22 and complete some 2,000 of these.³

² <https://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/>.

³ <https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/reports/StrategicPlanFY23.pdf>.





The agency has also been focused on conducting "financial suitability" investigations for supporters of the Uniting for Ukraine (U4U) program. The numbers investigated (177,000) and paroled in (82,000) showcase the capacity of USCIS when the political will is present.⁴

These numbers call into question whether as much as possible has been done to carry out the vetting necessary of other refugees before they can be admitted to meet the Administration's 125,000 goal.

Refugees from Latin American and Caribbean Countries

In the context of its new "border enforcement actions," the Biden Administration reiterated early this year that it has a goal of admitting up to 20,000 refugees from Latin America and the Caribbean during Fiscal Years 2023 and 2024.⁵ It is concerning to see this announcement framed this way, as a "legal pathway" needed to address a situation at the border, as opposed to as part of a longstanding U.S. humanitarian policy. While it is certainly reasonable to discuss which countries or regions should be part of the 125,000 admissions goal, it is cynical and counterproductive to adjust quotas to suit stated U.S. domestic policy goals. The real human beings waiting in refugee camps all over the world deserve better as do U.S. taxpayers willing to help them.

⁴ Id.

⁵ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/01/05/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-announces-new-border-enforcement-actions/>.





Welcome Corps

Working along HHS, the Department of State launched this initiative earlier this year, an initiative meant to facilitate the private sponsorship of refugees by individuals with the help of private organizations.⁹

Many refugees resettled in the first phase (already vetted and approved) will come from sub-Saharan African countries. This is positive, but CHIRLA is concerned that a program like this is putting the burden on ordinary citizens and straying away from the traditional federal refugee resettlement program.

Moreover, in the second phase of the program to be launched in mid-2023, the Government envisions a private role in the selection of who gets to come to the United States. Details remain unavailable how this would be implemented and how it would remain equitable.

Office of Refugee Resettlement

Most recently, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has been focused on the resettlement of Ukrainian and Afghan parolees as well as unaccompanied minors. This has been possible since there have been fewer other refugee admissions due to the machinations of the previous administration coupled with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ensuing question that must be answered is whether ORR is ready to assist those other refugees when they begin to arrive in larger numbers in line with President Biden's goals.

⁹ <https://www.state.gov/launch-of-the-welcome-corps-private-sponsorship-of-refugees-2/>.



CHIRLA's Perspective on Policy Solutions

While it was the Trump administration, in a cruel, concerted and xenophobic effort, that began to decimate the U.S. refugee program, the Biden Administration has not acted quickly enough to reverse course. The global pandemic was weaponized against migrants in general who were scapegoated as disease carriers in accordance with age-old and discredited racist tropes – the lack of a robust defense of refugees at every possible moment risks allowing those tropes to further delay a return to 2016 – and then to immediately build on that.

The reconstitution of the U.S. Refugee Admission Program is an essential goal that must be seen in the Biden Administration's current reliance on anti-asylum policies seemingly lifted straight out of the previous administration's playbook.

A humanitarian policy for the displaced must have both a functioning refugee admissions and resettlement program as well as an asylum process that is characterized by openness and due process. These work in tandem, addressing related yet separate parts of a larger whole. Without a better refugee system in place, some of those who could otherwise avail themselves of it may turn to other routes including asylum. This, in turn, would risk being used to draw up further restrictions.

We believe that this Administration, like all others, has a legal and moral obligation to welcome people with dignity, to stop criminalizing and vilifying immigrants, and to stop further border militarization. Congress, DHS, the Department of State and HHS need to work together, alongside all levels of government and community-based organizations, to appropriate and allocate the necessary resources to shore up a once robust and humane welcoming system.

Thank you for considering CHIRLA's statement.

Please contact our General Counsel, Carl Bergquist, cbergquist@chirla.org, and our Refugee Campaign Manager, Anahita Panahi apanahi@chirla.org, should you have any questions.





**CWS Statement to the Senate Judiciary Immigration Subcommittee, pertaining to its [hearing](#)
"Living Up to America's Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program"**

Church World Service (CWS) is a 77-year old humanitarian organization representing 37 Protestant, Anglican, and Orthodox communions, as well as resettlement offices and affiliates, home study and post release services for unaccompanied children, and asylum seeker case management services. CWS also operates the Resettlement Support Center (RSC) Africa in Nairobi, Kenya that guides refugees referred to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) from sub-Saharan Africa through the U.S. resettlement process. Bringing this experience and expertise to bear, we urge Congress to invest in our capacity to welcome and hold the administration accountable to rebuilding and strengthening our resettlement program.

CWS urges Congress to support a refugee resettlement program capable of leading the global response to rising displacement. Persecution and violence have forced [over 100 million people](#) to flee their homes, a number never before seen in human history. This figure includes over 32.5 million refugees, [around half](#) of whom are children under the age of 18. The fall of Kabul and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have displaced millions and demand our attention to facilitate regional and global security and our foreign policy priorities. We must also strengthen our nation's refugee resettlement system to respond more nimbly and provide life-saving assistance to those fleeing persecution from other countries, such as Syria, Venezuela, South Sudan, Burma, and so many other places around the world.

CWS calls on Congress to uplift the ways in which a robust refugee admissions program benefits America and American communities. A strong refugee resettlement system upholds our legacy as a nation of welcome and a beacon of hope to the oppressed and persecuted. It also brings enormous sociocultural and economic benefits and bolsters our national security and foreign policy objectives. At home, refugees are [small business owners, job creators, tax contributors](#); they enrich our communities with cultural diversity; they are a crucial part of the American story. Abroad, our resettlement program is a demonstration of global humanitarian leadership, ensuring geo-political stability and setting an example for human rights and democracy.

CWS urges Congress to hold the administration accountable to rebuild and bolster the U.S. resettlement program. Two years into the Biden administration, USRAP continues to face serious challenges as it struggles to rebuild from the Trump administration and COVID-19. Actual resettlement continues to fall far behind stated admissions goals, and a sluggish and backlogged process forces many refugees to wait for years in dangerous conditions for their cases to be processed. Rather than prioritize a stronger refugee program with the capacity to respond to global resettlement in a timely manner, the administration has over-relied on temporary protections, such as humanitarian parole programs, to respond to emerging humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, Ukraine, and the Americas. A robust refugee resettlement program that meets this moment requires an increased reliance on permanent protections, such as the U.S. resettlement and asylum programs, as well as the political will and innovative solutions to clear backlogs and improve processing. This is particularly important for exception backlogs like family reunification cases, Afghan and Iraqi Priority-2 referrals who assisted the U.S. mission overseas, and others who have languished in the U.S. resettlement pipeline.

CWS urges Congress to support robust funding for refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. As Congress considers appropriations for Fiscal Year 2024, it is imperative that it provide robust funding to accounts responsible for administering USRAP, addressing processing backlogs, and providing overseas assistance and domestic integration services to refugees and displaced persons. These accounts include the Office of Refugee Resettlement's [Refugee and Entrant Assistance Account](#), the State Department's [Migrant and Refugee Assistance Account](#) and [Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance Account](#); USAID's [International Disaster Assistance Account](#), and the Department of Homeland Security's [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services](#). It is equally imperative that the funding include [oversight language](#) to guide the use of these funds.

CWS urges Congress to enact positive legislation that strengthens the refugee resettlement program. Congress has a role in supporting positive legislation that restores and expands refugee protections and ensures needed services to those who have been resettled. Congress should support efforts like the [Refugee Protection Act](#), the bipartisan [Afghan Adjustment Act](#), the [Guaranteed Refugee Admissions Ceiling Enhancement \(GRACE\) Act](#) -- and work together on new legislation that responds to our resettlement system's changing needs.

This hearing provides a critical opportunity for Congress to reinvigorate long-established bipartisan support for our refugee admissions program, conduct needed oversight of the administration's rebuild, and commit to support refugee resettlement via robust appropriations and legislative action.

THE *Episcopal* CHURCH

The Episcopal Church Statement to the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Safety, pertaining to its hearing “*Living Up to America’s Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program*”

March 22, 2023

The Episcopal Church writes to express its strong support for refugee resettlement and humanitarian assistance to refugees in the United States and across the globe. The Episcopal Church, comprised of 110 domestic and international dioceses, is the U.S.-based province of the Anglican Communion, the third largest Christian community globally with more than 80 million members in more than 160 countries.

Our Church has long supported generous refugee admissions. For over 30 years, Episcopal Migration Ministries, one of the ten refugee resettlement agencies in public-private partnership with the U.S. government, has welcomed and contributed to the social and economic integration of over 100,000 refugees and Afghan parolees. Episcopalians, working with EMM and other resettlement agencies, also provide meaningful support for refugees as they transition to their new homes and communities.

With the global displacement crisis at over 100 million including 32.5 million refugees, we must remember the call in both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures to welcome the stranger. The Episcopal Church’s General Convention in 2018 set forth principles for responding to migration including a specific call “that the United States of America and all other nations to the best of their ability, contribute to resettlement, establish and maintain safe and orderly humanitarian protection for refugees, internally displaced persons, and other migrants seeking long-term solutions and safety.”¹

Resettlement, one of three durable solutions for refugees, is a lifesaving tool that helps the most vulnerable refugees. Additionally, resettlement helps stabilize the host countries that are responsible for high numbers of refugees living within their borders. It is crucial that the United States maintain its global leadership and reputation as a refuge for those in crisis.

We recognize the efforts of the U.S. government, resettlement agencies, and private citizens to support tens of thousands of Afghans and Ukrainians over the past two years; however, we would be remiss not to highlight the need to continue to rebuild the capacity of the U.S. Refugees Admissions Program. After the near dismantling of the resettlement program under the Trump Administration and further delays during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have not seen arrivals increase significantly as promised under the Biden Administration. In Fiscal Year 2022, the United States received just above 25,000 arrivals out of the 125,000 goal. Failing to address the overseas backlog is a detriment not only to refugees waiting to arrive but also their families who are already here.

We call on Congress to provide robust funding to support refugees of all nationalities and those affected by emerging as well as protracted crises. We also support the passage of the Afghan Adjustment Act to provide a pathway to permanent legal status for Afghans, including refugees, who have arrived to the United States on temporary humanitarian parole. Finally, as resettlement cannot be the solution for all refugees, we also urge Congress to look to foreign assistance to address the root causes of migration as well as to help those who have already fled.

¹ General Convention of The Episcopal Church, Austin, 2018: https://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=2018-D009

HIAS Statement for the Record
Senate Judiciary Immigration Subcommittee March 22, 2023

Today's subcommittee hearing, "Living up to America's Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program," is being held against the backdrop of an unprecedented number of 100 million persons displaced by persecution and violence. 26 million of these people are refugees¹, 2 million² of whom are in need of protection through resettlement. HIAS thanks the committee for holding this important hearing and submits this statement for the record in support.

The United States has a long standing, bipartisan tradition of welcoming the most vulnerable persons to the safety of our shores since the near inception of our great country. HIAS has played an important part in this tradition. Founded more than 100 years ago, HIAS assisted thousands of Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe and today helps resettle refugees of all faiths and backgrounds and assists them in integrating into America. HIAS is honored to serve as one of the nine resettlement agencies who work in partnership with the U.S. government to help resettle refugees through our affiliate network around the country.

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the need for a change and codification in American policy concerning refugees became clear as hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese and Cambodians fled political chaos and physical danger in their homelands. It is important to remember that the *Refugee Act of 1980* passed overwhelmingly, with bipartisan support in both Chambers of Congress. The Act created the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program (USRAP) which established a more regular system of refugee resettlement. Since 1980, the U.S. has welcomed over 3 million refugees under the USRAP.

America resettles refugees for humanitarian reasons, but doing so is in our national security and economic interest. The U.S. held the leadership position in resettlement for many years, showing solidarity and strengthening relationships with refugee host nations who provide refuge to millions of people despite their own fragility and developing economies. In the U.S., history has demonstrated that refugees, over the long run, benefit the United States. A government study conducted in 2017 which was leaked, but never released, found that over a ten year period refugees contributed \$63 billion more in federal, state and local taxes than they took in services and assistance.³

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/insights/explainers/100-million-forcibly-displaced.html>

² <https://www.state.gov/refugee-admissions/>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/18/us/politics/refugees-revenue-cost-report-trump.html>

It should be noted that throughout the USRAP's history, even in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the U.S. has supported the robust admission of refugees. However, during the Trump Administration, the USRAP refugee ceiling was significantly lowered and related appropriations from Congress decreased which materially hurt the program's infrastructure. Covid-19 further impacted the program. During this low point for the USRAP, the national refugee resettlement capacity of the United States was weakened and the resettlement agency networks were forced to close 100 of over 300 sites, with minimal staffing in the surviving locations.

HIAS applauds the Biden Administration for its commitment to rebuilding and strengthening the USRAP, yet efforts have been slow and the program continues to be plagued by backlogs and low numbers of refugee admissions. Despite last year's Presidential Determination of a ceiling of 125,000 refugees the U.S. settled only 25,465. For Fiscal Year 23 the ceiling is set again at 125,000, yet unless the pace of arrivals picks up dramatically, the U.S. will, again, not come close to reaching that goal. As of the end of February 2023, only 12,307 refugees⁴ have been admitted through the USRAP.

Congress intended for the USRAP to be dynamic, agile, efficient and respond to the global needs of the day. The USRAP should also be utilized for exigent humanitarian purposes and could have been leveraged for the admission of Afghans upon their evacuation from Afghanistan during the fall of Kabul and Ukrainians displaced by the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Instead, there has been an overreliance on the use of humanitarian parole by the Biden Administration to admit these populations - a process that was not contemplated for mass admissions. HIAS urges Congress to strengthen and prioritize the USRAP as one of the primary vehicles for U.S. humanitarian protection policy.

HIAS also urges Congress to more consistently prioritize reunification of separated refugee family households. Complementary pathways to refugee resettlement should also be considered and prioritized to the United States.

HIAS enthusiastically supports the new Welcome Corps program. Influenced by the refugee private sponsorship model used in Canada, Welcome Corps is the first U.S. government program supporting private refugee sponsorship in nearly 40 years. Welcome Corps builds on the success of small group private sponsorship used to resettle Afghan evacuees in the wake of the fall of the Afghanistan government and Ukrainians following the invasion of their homeland. HIAS has embraced the private refugee sponsorship model, having created over 100 Welcome Circles in 20 states of

⁴ USCIS USRAP stakeholder engagement meeting, March 15, 2023

private sponsors, faith based congregations and local organizations for Afghan and Ukrainian families. HIAS urges Congress to ensure that Welcome Corps serves to augment the resettlement capacity and complement the USRAP, not replace traditional refugee resettlement in any way.

HIAS also urges support for HIAS urges Congress to support robust funding and oversight of these funds for refugees and other forcibly displaced persons as it considers appropriations for FY24. These accounts include HHS' Office of Refugee Resettlement's Refugee and Entrant Assistance Account, the State Department's Migrant and Refugee Assistance Account and Emergency Refugee Migration Account, USAID's International Disaster Assistance Account and the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' Account.

As part of the FY24 appropriations process, we ask that the Lautenberg Amendment, a pathway for members of historically persecuted religious groups from the Former Soviet Union countries and Iran, is again reauthorized. Moreover, we ask that Ukrainian religious minorities who are in the Lautenberg pipeline should be considered for refugee status. At the time of the 2022 Russian invasion, approximately 17,000 Ukrainian applicants for refugee status through the Lautenberg program were in the queue. Many of these were paroled into the United States under the "Uniting for Ukraine (U4U)" program, without knowing how U4U would impact their eligibility for the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Congress should urge the Administration to take immediate steps to ensure that a non-citizen who is in the Lautenberg Amendment pipeline and has been paroled into the United States for humanitarian reasons, may apply from within the U.S. and be considered for refugee status under section 207 of the Immigration and Nationality Act. We ask that at the very least, USCIS should, without further delay, advise Lautenberg-eligible U4U parolees on how they can pursue refugee status without undue hardship and expense.

Finally, Congress should act now to support efforts like the bipartisan Afghan Adjustment Act, to fulfill the promise of standing by our allies who stood by America's side during the 20 year U.S. mission in Afghanistan.



International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) Statement for the Record

**Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing
Living Up to America's Promise:
The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program**

March 22, 2023

Introduction

After years of disinvestment and disruption, the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) admitted fewer refugees in fiscal year 2021 than ever before. And in fiscal year 2022, only 25,465 refugees were admitted. This fiscal year, President Biden set the refugee admissions goal at 125,000 and is on track to resettle around 60,000 refugees. These historically low numbers reflect a range of systemic issues plaguing the program: the lasting impact of Trump administration policies designed to obstruct refugee protection, limited staff to timely interview refugees and make a determination on refugee applications, impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on processing, inefficient and flawed extreme vetting, lack of transparency, and chronic underfunding. As the numbers of refugees around the world rise due to conflict and persecution, the United States must do more to reverse these problems so the USRAP can fairly and efficiently welcome refugees through this important and long-standing program in the decades to come.

While President Biden issued an executive order to reform the resettlement program and has instituted many positive changes, there is more to be done. With over a decade of experience providing legal assistance to refugees applying for resettlement, IRAP is familiar with the urgent protection needs facing refugees and the structural issues hindering them from finding protection. Most refugees currently wait to be resettled for years or even decades without any information about their case. They are often separated from family members while they wait. Refugees deserve more. Congress and the Biden administration should improve overseas processing, implement innovations in the program to welcome more refugees, and institute policies to better welcome refugees in communities across the country.



Improving USRAP Processing

Reforming the program

Congress and the administration can undertake a number of actions to address the varied challenges and opportunities in the refugee resettlement program. Currently, USRAP processing is an opaque, backlogged process that requires reforms and additional resources. Improving the program today will ensure refugees can find protection in the United States tomorrow and for years to come. To accomplish this, Congress should pursue legislation and robust appropriations to make the resettlement program resilient throughout future administrations.

USRAP processing must become more transparent, equitable, fair, and efficient. Instituting transparency measures, like allowing refugees and the public to access data about average processing times, will enhance trust in the program. Permitting access to counsel during interviews will improve fairness and equity in the program. Adding resources like staff and video technology, will make processing more efficient. Finally, reversing extreme vetting measures and ensuring vetting procedures are fair and efficient will eliminate harmful backlogs and allow the program to better fulfill its humanitarian goals.

Family reunification

Unfortunately, the status quo of the slow-moving USRAP harms refugees awaiting protection, especially those who are separated from family members. During their difficult and sometimes chaotic flight from persecution and dangerous conditions to safety, family members often become separated. There are specific programs to facilitate family reunification for refugees, such as the Follow-to-Join (FTJ) process, which is a pathway specifically for refugee and asylee family reunification. However, the Trump administration's four-year targeted offensive against refugees and the overly complex and burdensome process have led to refugee families being indefinitely separated. IRAP urges the administration to prioritize family unity by clearing backlogs of families waiting for reunification.



Innovations in USRAP

Climate Displacement

Climate-related disasters already eclipse conflict as the leading cause of reported forced displacements. However, no domestic laws or multilateral treaties exist to protect climate-affected populations displaced within their own countries or across borders. IRAP urges Congress to work with the administration on the development of legal protections for people displaced by climate-fueled disasters and environmental devastation.

Private Sponsorship

This year, the State Department announced Welcome Corps, a new program facilitating the private sponsorship of refugees in the United States. Welcome Corps will expand resettlement opportunities and resources by allowing civil society organizations and private groups of individuals to directly support newcomers. IRAP welcomes this launch and urges Congress to work with the administration on ensuring the program's complementarity to existing USRAP.

Advancing Welcome

Reaching safety is only the first step on a displaced person's journey to rebuilding their life. The U.S. government must rapidly strengthen refugee reception capabilities across the country to better assist newly arrived refugees rebuild their lives. Congress, states, and the administration must invest in a federal welcoming infrastructure and inclusion strategy to address barriers to workforce participation, education, English language learning, housing, healthcare, and other essential services that ensure the successful participation of refugees and other immigrants in American society. To this end, IRAP welcomed the passage of the Bridging the Gap for New Americans Act, which became law last year. Yet much more is needed. IRAP urges Congress to pass legislation that addresses these barriers, and to work with state leaders and the administration to provide refugees with the tools and resources they need to achieve their full potential. IRAP also urges Congress to pass the Afghan Adjustment Act to provide Afghan allies in the United States with a pathway to citizenship.



Recommendations

Congress and the administration can work together to reform USRAP so that it better serves refugees and the communities that welcome them. IRAP urges Congress to:

- Support robust funding for overseas humanitarian support for refugees, provide funding to improve USRAP processing times, and improve funding for domestic services to ensure that refugees resettled to the U.S. have enough resources to thrive in their new communities. Beyond expanding current capacity, such funding will help ensure the survival of the program in the future.
- Pass legislation to advance welcome and integration for refugees, including the Afghan Adjustment Act.
- Urge the Biden administration to invest in USRAP infrastructure to speed up processing, eliminate backlogs, reunite families, and reform unfair and inefficient vetting practices. These efforts will ensure the U.S. can admit the goal of 125,000 refugees this year and will make it harder to disrupt the program in the future.

About the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP)

The International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) is a global legal aid and advocacy organization working to create a world where refugees and all people seeking safety are empowered to claim their right to freedom of movement and a path to lasting refuge. Since our establishment, we have provided legal assistance to thousands of displaced persons seeking legal pathways to safe countries. IRAP provides pro bono legal representation, legal advice, and expert referrals to refugees all over the world. IRAP believes everyone should have a safe place to live and a safe way to get there.



Statement for the Record by Kids in Need of Defense (KIND)
“Living Up to America’s Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S.
Refugee Admissions Program”
U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Safety
March 22, 2023

KIND is an international organization headquartered in Washington, D.C., with programming in the United States, Mexico, Central America, and Europe. With 16 offices in the United States, KIND plays a pivotal role in the representation of unaccompanied immigrant children throughout the immigration process. KIND’s core program focus is the delivery of legal and social services, which includes legal representation of children through our vast private sector pro bono network and in-house legal team, legal training, technical assistance, impact litigation, and work to reunify families, as well as psychosocial support to address the trauma often experienced by children who have been forcibly displaced; and policy and advocacy to promote laws and policies that protect unaccompanied immigrant children. KIND works with children at every stage of their migration journey—as they depart from or return to high-migration communities, as they migrate through transit countries, and in the U.S. as they seek legal protection. Our programmatic work with children directly informs our policy work and provides us with a unique vantage point from which to consider holistically the needs of these children.

In recent years, more than 89 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced, nearly 41 percent of them children.¹ A combination of factors, such as war, violence, political instability, economic insecurity, and natural disasters, has forced millions of children to flee their countries, as threats to their lives and wellbeing make even routine activities such as going to school perilous and impede their ability to grow in safety. Many children may migrate alone or become separated from parents or other family members during their journey. These children often confront particular dangers on account of their age and developmental stage, and frequently are targeted for violence, trafficking, exploitation, and other harms.

This crisis of displaced persons, including millions of refugees, requires the United States to redouble its resettlement efforts. In the first months of the Biden administration, the president acknowledged this need, and pledged under a series of executive orders to rebuild and restore the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and to open additional pathways for refugee resettlement.² KIND was particularly gratified that the administration included the resumption of the Central American Minors (CAM) program, an opportunity for in-country refugee processing for certain children, which began in 2014 and was terminated in 2017, as a component of its plan for welcoming refugees. KIND is currently screening and assisting parents who wish to file under the re-designed CAM program, which opened to new applicants on June 15, 2021.³

¹ UNHCR, Figures At a Glance, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

² Creating a Comprehensive Regional Framework to Address the Causes of Migration, to Manage Migration Throughout North and Central America, and to Provide Safe and Orderly Processing of Asylum Seekers at the United States Border, E.O. 14040, February 2, 2021 ; Rebuilding and Enhancing Refugee Resettlement and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration, E.O. 14013, February 4, 2021 Preventing and Combatting Discrimination on the Basis of Gender Identity or Sexual Orientation, E.O. 13988, January 20, 2021

³ <https://www.state.gov/refugee-admissions/central-american-minors-cam-program/>

CAM is a critical tool for ensuring the protection of child migrants from Central America. It could also serve as a laboratory for promoting innovative practices and expanded access to refugee protection across the region and around the world. For this promise to unfold, however, the CAM program requires further resources and policy changes, such as ensuring that children have access to counsel, equipping adjudicators with the most up-to-date factual and legal analysis available, and ensuring the safety of children during the adjudication process. Saving children from taking a perilous journey to the southwestern border of the United States is in everyone's interest but it requires greater attention and support from Congress and the administration.

CAM background

As a response to the unprecedented increase in the arrival of unaccompanied children at the border in 2014, the Obama administration announced the creation of a unique refugee processing program designed to create a legal pathway for children to enter the United States and reunite with parents. The program permitted parents residing lawfully in the United States to petition for their children to receive a refugee interview in their home country. If a child met the definition of refugee, they would be processed accordingly, but if an adjudicator determined that the child did not qualify and yet was in danger, the adjudicator could recommend the child for parole into the United States. This dual track approach was designed to decrease the number of children traveling alone to the border and was consistent with other "in-country" refugee processing programs run by the United States in situations where individuals clearly faced persecution but had no means of easily leaving their home country to seek refugee status.

From December 2014 to November 2017, when it was terminated by the Trump Administration, the CAM program received approximately 13,000 applications from parents residing in the United States. In total, 1,627 children were admitted through the program as refugees; while another 1,465 children had been paroled into the United States. Another 2,714 conditional parole approvals were rescinded following termination of the parole portion of the program in August 2017 and thousands more children and parents had applications pending at the time the Trump Administration fully terminated CAM.⁴ On March 1, 2019, a federal court ordered the Trump Administration to resume processing the revoked cases, resulting in the arrival of approximately 1613 additional parolees by the end of December 2022.⁵ In addition, between April 2021 and June 2022, another 130 children were admitted as refugees through the CAM program.⁶

Thus, CAM serves as a vital lifeline for at-risk children, but for it to fully live up to its potential, additional support and resources must be provided, particularly to support the many steps of the process that parents and children must go through after applying. In addition, many children paroled into the United States through CAM may have had viable refugee claims but did not have the opportunity to fully explore them. Given our experience with the types of claims frequently raised by Central American children, such as claims relating to domestic violence, sexual and gender based violence, persecution by gang members in control of discrete areas of a city or town, political opinion, and persecution based on family group claims, we believe that far more children could qualify as refugees if the appropriate mechanisms were in place to more easily assess their claims.

⁴ Kids in Need of Defense, *Thwarted Potential: The Need to Revive and Expand the Central American Minors (CAM) Program as a Key Path to Protection for At-Risk Unaccompanied Children*, November 2020, <https://supportkind.org/resources/thwarted-potential/>

⁵ Rachel Schmittke and Yael Schacher, *Mixed Blessing: Guatemalan Experiences Under the New Central American Minors Program*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2023/3/14/mixed-blessing-guatemalan-experiences-under-the-new-central-american-minors-programnbsp>

⁶ Id.

Recommendations for Ensuring Refugee Claims are Properly Identified

KIND has written extensively about recommended improvements to the CAM program. We highlight here some of our key recommendations for maximizing CAM's viability as a vehicle for strengthening and expanding the success of the U.S. refugee resettlement goals.

Ensuring that children are permitted access to counsel during interviews

In KIND's experience, the most critical factor in maximizing a finding that a child qualifies as a refugee is the provision of counsel. In fact, Executive Order 14013 specifically directed government agencies to explore access to counsel during refugee interviews⁷, a practice that would be particularly helpful during CAM adjudications. Children's age, development, and ability to trust strangers may all contribute to difficulties during the interview process; an attorney by their side, who has helped them understand and prepare for the interview, can foster confidence, clarify issues, or help to elicit answers when the child does not understand the adjudicator's questions. This may be particularly critical for children in the CAM program who are separated from their parents and therefore do not have that additional support available to them. KIND encountered many children during the initial CAM program with meritorious claims who simply could not articulate their experiences or make the necessary legal connections during the interview. For example, pro bono counsel in one case was able to elicit information about domestic abuse that the children had initially been afraid to disclose, leading to their approval for refugee status and subsequent travel to the United States. In other cases, where KIND learned about a child's case after a denial, KIND was able to provide legal assistance on requests for review, securing reversal of several decisions.

Similarly, KIND assisted a Honduran youth whose initial refugee claim was denied because he did not understand that the violence he suffered because of his sexual orientation could establish eligibility for refugee status, and the USCIS interviewing officer failed to elicit information from him regarding sexual orientation. KIND helped him submit a request for reconsideration based on sexual orientation and he was granted refugee status.

As these examples show, legal assistance makes a critical difference in refugee claims, particularly in a new program such as CAM in which the traditional framework for accessing USRAP (US Refugee Admissions Program) is inverted. While the traditional refugee processing program involves tightly controlled and coordinated referrals and pre-identified categories of refugee candidates, CAM relies on self-referrals through a parent or other family member and appears to have fewer presumptions of eligibility built into its adjudicative standards. As noted above, we recommend revisiting these issues, but marrying facts to legal standards will always be easier for adjudicators when counsel participates in the process.

Permitting counsel to be present during CAM interviews would be a straightforward mechanism for improving adjudications, increasing efficiencies, and ensuring that meritorious refugee claims are recognized.

Reinforcing existing factual and legal frameworks upon which refugee determinations are based

Following World War II, countries around the world committed to ensuring that people fleeing persecution and other threats to their lives and safety would never be returned to harm. International law similarly recognizes the particular vulnerability of children and articulates special concern for their rights and protection. These fundamental principles, which are reflected in the United States' values and laws, have only grown in importance as the U.S., like other nations, works to establish safe, orderly and humane border processes, improve the asylum

⁷ E.O. 14013, Sec. 4(g)(iii).

system's responsiveness, and respond to the overwhelming numbers of refugees fleeing persecution around the world.

And while the basic contours of refugee protection remain the same, society's understanding of persecution and who may be subject to persecution is constantly evolving, requiring adjudicators to have access to the most accurate information possible as well as the opportunity to explore all relevant legal interpretations in a given case. KIND endorses the Biden administration's charge to executive branch agencies to improve the quantity and quality of training, to develop case profiles and other materials which reflect common fact patterns and legal arguments, and to welcome the assistance of counsel in identifying and refining legal conclusions.

We particularly endorse the directive in Executive Order 14013 for DHS to create more detailed analysis of country conditions to assist adjudicators in analyzing the very specific factual issues arising in many Central American protection cases.⁸ By its nature, adjudicating refugee and asylum claims is difficult. The fact-intensive, highly traumatic, and deeply personal narratives involved in establishing eligibility for protection can be draining and daunting for adjudicators and applicants alike. Children, in particular, may be unable to provide the necessary context and understanding of country conditions required to accurately locate their personal suffering within a broader legal framework. This places a heavy burden on the adjudicator to fill in the gaps and make the connections to broader patterns of persecution and harm.

Although CAM adjudicators receive country conditions training prior to their deployment, KIND staff and other NGOs have observed results reflecting an uneven knowledge of country conditions, as well as a reluctance to apply legally sound but potentially novel conclusions to children's claims. Expanded training from recognized experts on country conditions from within the NGO community would support a deeper understanding of the issues, but decision analysis is also required. Thorough, detailed country conditions analysis in which adjudicators receive guidance on the application of particular fact patterns to legal standards of eligibility offers a solution to this concern. We understand that the use of uniform country conditions analysis has been beneficial in the processing of Afghan asylum claims and has likely resulted in both higher grant rates and greater consistency across offices. Given the issues and the demographics of the CAM program, in-depth analysis would provide important guidance to an adjudicator, simplify the process for children, and ensure that we are maximizing CAM's potential to identify refugee populations.

Making use of such tools would also provide more focused opportunities to ensure that applications of legal standards to facts were consistent with international norms, creating ongoing opportunities to analyze and adapt to rapidly changing country conditions and legal developments. With respect to children's claims, country conditions briefs could also reflect the unique dangers children face, the impact on their development, and the way their articulation of facts may vary from expected or common recitations of harm and persecution. With the expected release of a particular social group rule, the opportunities for further engaging in particular social group analysis through these briefs are also likely to expand.

Expanding access to particularly vulnerable groups such as women, children, and LGBTQ individuals

Throughout the executive orders addressing refugee protection, there is an important emphasis on expansion of avenues for protecting the most vulnerable.⁹ To most faithfully implement this directive requires a robust refugee program with multiple avenues for identifying those in need of protection and multiple pathways for accessing the system.¹⁰ CAM represents an important innovation, but its potential is still under-utilized. Driving more

⁸ Id. at Sec.4(g)(i).

⁹ See Sec. 1 Policy, E.O. 14103.

¹⁰ Id. at Sec. 1(g) "My Administration shall seek opportunities to enhance access to the refugee program for people who are more

potential child migrants to use CAM rather than risk the dangerous journey north on their own requires expanding not only the pool of parents eligible to petition, but also increasing the opportunities for children in distress to participate in the program.

KIND has previously provided a series of recommendations¹¹ designed to expand children's eligibility criteria, including:

- permitting children residing outside Central America to access the program,
- allowing UNHCR and other NGOs to provide on-the-ground referrals of children at risk, regardless of their parent's legal status in the U.S.;
- assisting orphaned or abandoned children in accessing the program who do not have a tie to the United States;
- using technology and other streamlining mechanisms to create more accessible interviews; and
- providing emergency relocations and protection to children at imminent risk as quickly as possible.

These recommendations are either reflected in or consistent with the spirit of the executive orders, enhance child protection, and make it far more likely that child refugees will be recognized and admitted to the United States.

Ensuring that legal standards on issues such as domestic and gang violence are consistent with international norms

Executive Order 1440 directs agencies to align current adjudication criteria so that decisions are consistent with international norms, which notably are more generous in their analysis of nexus and other critical legal standards when assessing issues such as gang and domestic violence claims.¹² Children interviewed through the CAM program are frequently at risk of persecution based on domestic violence, gang violence and territorial control, sexual and gender-based violence, or their status as children within some particular social group. Uneven application of domestic legal standards, including failure to consider long-standing international recommendations on particular social group and newly emerging persecution claims contributed to a lower-than-expected refugee grant rate during the initial CAM program. Based on KIND's experience working with children in the northern Central American countries and in the United States, we are convinced that the more expansive application of legal standards endorsed within the E.O would lead to an increase in refugee admissions through the program.

For example, many of the claims involved a fear of persecution based on membership in a particular social group, persecution by gang members, and gender-based violence, all of which have been repeatedly recognized as bases for refugee protection but are nonetheless often treated as complex and confusing. Certainly, without assistance of counsel or clear guidelines on eligible categories, eliciting the facts necessary to establish such claims may be difficult, but the legal analysis has progressed to a level of sophistication that can quickly encompass the dangers faced by children in Central America. For example, the UNHCR has offered legal opinions and recommendations supporting a finding that opposition to gangs, which in many areas of northern Central American countries serve as a de facto government, could be a form of political opinion, since at least 2016, but the government has failed to fully embrace this analysis. Similarly, children have been repeatedly recognized as a social group by the UNHCR and other countries. The constant politicization of particular social group analysis—from the long-

vulnerable to persecution, including women, children, and other individuals who are at risk of persecution related to their gender, gender expression, or sexual orientation.”

¹² E.O 14040, Sec. 4(c)(i).

delayed promulgation of a coherent PSG rule to the fearmongering caused by “floodgate” arguments against recognizing persecution towards children by non-government actors further contributed to an atmosphere in which parole was the “safer” option in CAM cases. Because refugee processing within Central America was a new initiative, general lack of familiarity among refugee officers about country conditions and the nature of refugee claims may have also contributed to the depressed grant rate.

The directives within the executive orders, coupled with the anticipated release of the particular social group rule, offers a fresh start for recognizing the refugee status of many Central American children.

Retaining Existing Refugee Protections for Asylum Seekers

Inconsistent policies also threaten to undermine the success of the CAM program. The most glaring example of such inconsistencies is evident in the recently proposed rule imposing new conditions on eligibility for asylum. If adopted, the rule would create a rebuttable presumption of ineligibility for asylum if an applicant failed to make use of an authorized parole program, registered for an appointment to present at a U.S. port of entry using the CBP One application, or could demonstrate that they had applied for and been denied asylum in another country in which they passed on the way to the United States. Unaccompanied children are exempted from ineligibility and applicants may raise other evidence that they could not comply with the conditions, but this is not enough to legitimate the proposal. The rule itself would essentially condition asylum on whether an individual or family had been granted permission to apply for asylum, contrary to both domestic and international law and treaty obligations. While we understand the desire to incentivize the use of parole programs to decrease irregular migration, this cannot be done at the expense of the legitimate right to seek asylum in the United States regardless of immigration status.

The far better course of action is to make CAM a truly viable refugee program, giving parents and children the necessary assurances that cases will be considered fairly and efficiently. This in turn can create opportunities for other in-country based refugee processing and reduce potential pressure at the southern border through positive and proactive programs.

Conclusion

All signs indicate that the refugee program is poised for growth, and that USCIS is increasing its capacity to process more refugees, including those from within the CAM programs. KIND welcomes these improvements but urges Congress and the administration to do more to support innovative programs such as CAM. CAM presents an opportunity to showcase the possibilities of a refugee program that is more robust, more creative, and nimbler in its response to both emerging crises and systemic oppression and persecution. Executive orders issued in 2021 include numerous directives that could be successfully applied in the CAM process, allowing CAM to serve as a touchstone for the administration’s broader vision of refugee resettlement. This will only happen, however, if the CAM program is prioritized as a vehicle for increasing refugee admissions from Central America and recommendations to increase its efficiency and inclusiveness are adopted.

Statement for the Record for the Refugee Admissions hearing by Lawyers for Good Government (L4GG):

“Though the U.S. has historically been a global leader in refugee admissions, we are now struggling to meet our international commitments during a time of severe need throughout the world. It is well past time to bolster the Refugee Admissions Program and continue our nation’s legacy of welcoming those fleeing persecution and war. We call on Congress to ensure that the U.S. can ensure as many refugees as possible can be resettled this year.”



Lutheran Immigration
and Refugee Service

Written Statement from Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS)

Senate Judiciary Committee

A Hearing of the Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, & Border Safety

“Living Up to America’s Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program”

Wednesday, March 22, 2023

Dirksen Senate Office Building Room 226

Introduction

LIRS (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service) appreciates the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Security for having this timely and critical hearing on “The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.” As a faith-based organization with over 80 years of experience welcoming refugees and asylum seekers, LIRS is grateful for this opportunity to uplift the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) and provide recommendations on how it should be supported to achieve its mission of offering resettlement opportunities to persons overseas who are of special humanitarian concern.

LIRS calls for a strong USRAP through robust congressional funding, an ambitious refugee admissions target or Presidential Determination (PD) on refugee admissions, and inclusive, welcoming communities for the refugees that enter the United States. This requires the combined action of the Administration, Congress, and welcoming communities.

Building Capacity to Clear Backlogs and Address Global Protection Needs

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates there are more than 100 million people forcibly displaced across the globe. While most displaced people are internally displaced, 27.1 million are refugees. **The United States must prioritize strengthening our resettlement capacity and step up as a resettlement leader given [the record number of displaced people](#) globally.**

Since its establishment in 1980, USRAP has stood as a clear signal of the humanitarian leadership and resounding welcome of the United States. In recent years, however, U.S. admissions numbers have been at all-time lows. In FY21, only 11,411 refugees were admitted, the lowest since the establishment of the admissions program. In FY22, the U.S. welcomed 25,465 refugees, falling 80 percent behind the administration’s goal of 125,000. This is largely attributed to significant policy changes during the previous administration that lowered the PD and drastically diminished U.S. processing capacity globally, as well as the impacts of COVID-19.

While certain refugees have benefited from innovations in USRAP processing, more should be done to address backlogs which formed due to historic reductions in the annual refugee ceiling and the past administration’s discriminatory policies. We applaud efforts such as concurrent processing and support the expansion of this model to new locations. Further, **LIRS calls on Congress to pass the [NO BAN Act](#) which would instill guardrails on U.S. immigration and refugee programs, including by limiting executive authority to impose religion-based bans on the entry of individuals to the United States.** Other efforts to shore up and update the refugee program are dearly needed and could be resolved by the passage of the Refugee Protection Act.

We appreciate that the administration and Congress have taken many positive steps toward rebuilding USRAP and increasing its overall capacity through an investment in training and hiring of fresh staff to accommodate programmatic needs. This has notably resulted in the significant expansion of refugee resettlement in the Western Hemisphere, including for Venezuelan and Nicaraguan nationals. LIRS supports this expansion and encourages the administration to do more to protect people fleeing persecution and may otherwise be forced to make the dangerous journey to our border to save their lives while also preserving this right. More should be done to expand and protect the investments that have been made. **Congress should protect these investments by passing the [Guaranteed Refugee Admissions Ceiling Enhancement \(GRACE\) Act](#) which would set a minimum annual goal for the number of refugees to be admitted. Further, Congress should uphold the Refugee Act and abandon any efforts that would limit access to asylum.**

Create Credible Solutions for Those Displaced by Climate Disaster

According to the [2021 report](#) by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, more than 7 million people across 104 countries are currently displaced by climate disaster. Nevertheless, there remains no consensus on terminology surrounding climate displaced people and no explicit language exists that provides protection for being displaced by climate disasters.

Though the Biden Administration did create the Standing Interagency Policy Process on Climate Change and Migration to handle and coordinate solutions surrounding climate mitigation and the problems of climate displacement, there have been few outcomes to this development outside of the initial consultation process. In July 2021, LIRS released [a report](#) outlining immigration pathways available to climate disaster displaced persons. LIRS is calling for the Biden Administration to provide a follow-up report on the actions of the Interagency Policy Process of Climate Change and Migration and **urging Congress to introduce legislation that will provide greater protection for people displaced by climate disaster, like Senator Markey's Global Climate Change Resilience Strategy (S.1335), and to appropriate assistance and disaster funding for communities on the front lines of climate disaster.** Greater action from Congress and the administration is required to ensure there are durable protection pathways for groups impacted and displaced by climate disaster.

Improving the Efficiency and Agility of USRAP to Respond to Emergent Crises

Over the past two years we have witnessed an outpouring of support by Americans welcoming people seeking protection after the fall of the democratically elected government in Afghanistan, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and Venezuelans fleeing the authoritarian regime. Many of these displaced persons entered the United States on parole – a lifesaving but temporary protection mechanism that has been streamlined for certain populations under the Biden administration. **We implore the 118th Congress to pass the bipartisan [Afghan Adjustment Act](#),** keeping America's promises to our allies, assisting those left behind, and providing lasting protection to Afghans evacuated to the United States in a historic airlift in 2021. We also encourage the administration and Congress to work together to ensure USRAP is similarly streamlined and more agile to respond to urgent humanitarian situations so that people seeking protection may avail themselves of more durable pathways, without disrupting processing for people who have been awaiting processing for years.

Building Public Support for USRAP

Welcoming refugees reflects our core values as a nation. When we provide pathways to individuals fleeing violence and persecution status, we honor our founding principles and demonstrate our commitment to those in need. The United States was founded largely by immigrants and refugees seeking a more just and equitable future and we benefit immensely from their contributions. In order to uphold these principles and ensure that our country builds upon its historical commitments to the international community, we must devote the necessary resources to meet USRAP goals and help serve refugees along with our allies.

LIRS, along with communities across the United States, is welcoming refugees with open arms. Through our Circle of Welcome programs, community groups partner with local resettlement agencies to provide specific services and financial support to a newly arrived refugee family. This type of volunteer commitment is incredibly important to the work of welcome and should be uplifted by Congress.

Refugees enrich our communities and our workforce. They diversify the perspectives and cultural competencies of our communities, strengthening our nation with new perspectives and expertise. As they find their footing, refugees stimulate the economy, raise productivity, improve local worker wages, boost innovation, contribute significant tax revenue, and often generate international trade because of their

connections to various countries. Refugees also become leaders in our society – some are standing Members of Congress today.

FY24 Appropriations Across Refugee Related Accounts

LIRS calls for a strong USRAP through robust congressional funding across various critical government accounts for the 2024 fiscal year. Specifically, there is a need for increased capacity and funding to support the Migration and Refugee Assistance Account (MRA), International Disaster Assistance (IDA), the Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA) account, and Refugee and Entrant Assistance (REA) Account which provides critical services and funding for the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Increasing funding across these accounts will be critical to build up and sustain USRAP programming and assistance during the world's greatest refugee crisis. Specifically, REA funding is critical for the work of welcome of LIRS, and all U.S. refugee resettlement agencies, which provides services for refugees, asylum seekers, humanitarian parolees, Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders, and unaccompanied children.

At LIRS, we work every day with asylum seekers, refugees, and unaccompanied children who are arriving from across the globe due to persecution, violence, or other safety concerns. We know that [mental health services](#) and clinical support for refugees, asylum seekers, and unaccompanied children are critical for their success and wellbeing in the United States. **We urge Congress to increase funding for all refugee-related accounts, specifically REA funding which enables resettlement agencies to welcome and support arrivals.** Given the mental health toll that displacement and resettlement have on populations, we also urge Congress to increase funding for mental health services for all immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in the FY24 appropriations spending bill.

Conclusion

LIRS urges Congress robustly fund USRAP and refugee related accounts during the FY24 appropriations process, think strategically about providing more protection pathways for climate disaster displaced persons, provide pathways to lawful permanent residence for Afghans and other populations arriving through humanitarian parole, work to mitigate systemic immigration backlogs, and enact positive legislation that strengthens the refugee resettlement program. **Congress should support the legislative initiatives noted above and should pass the [Refugee Protection Act](#).**

During this critical moment of record levels of displacement due to conflict, disaster, and persecution, United States humanitarian leadership is crucial. Congress plays a key role in the United States' response to this refugee crisis and LIRS urges legislators to think strategically about the ways we can sustainably welcome and support refugee and asylum seekers in the United States, and ensure we are thinking in the medium- and long- term about lasting policy solutions that will fortify the USRAP and safeguard our nation's promise to be a beacon of hope and opportunity for populations in need of refuge.

We encourage Members of Congress to join LIRS in celebrating the resilience of refugees and our collective work of welcome on World Refugee Day, June 20th by meeting with our refugee and faith leaders, our staff, and members of supportive communities to learn more about the benefits and barriers to resettlement.



MARYKNOLL OFFICE FOR GLOBAL CONCERNS
Peace, Social Justice and Integrity of Creation
www.maryknollogc.org

Marych 21, 2023

Dear Chair Alex Padilla and Ranking Member John Cornyn,

On behalf of Catholic missionaries known as Maryknoll missionaries, some of whom are serving the needs of refugees in Uganda, Kenya, Thailand, and Bangladesh, I wish to thank the Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship and Border Safety for holding the hearing "Living Up to America's Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program."

The need for the United States to live up to the promise of welcoming refugees is urgent. The number of refugees worldwide is higher than ever – more than 27 million – and the U.S. refugee admissions program is weaker than ever, admitting only 25,465 in fiscal year 2022.

It's also important to recognize that two-thirds of the people displaced across borders come from just five countries: Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Myanmar. These are strong people, capable of surviving the most challenging adversity on Earth, who have a lot to offer their new country.

The U.S. Refugee Admissions program gives refugees a pathway to integration, lawful residence, and citizenship. Established 1980, it was for many years a shining example for the world to follow.

We appreciate President Biden raising the refugee ceiling to 125,000. Now we urge Congress to rebuild U.S. capacity to reach that ceiling. It is a shame that 85 percent of refugee slots will expire unused by the end of the year because the program lacks the capacity to admit them.

To rebuild the U.S. refugee program, we need members of Congress to appropriate necessary funds for critical infrastructure; restore the U.S. asylum program so that people can actually access it; affirm the rights of stateless people living in the United States; and provide a pathway to protection for people who have been displaced by climate change.

The strong, coordinated U.S. response to Ukrainians displaced by the Russian invasion of their country demonstrates what the U.S. needs to do to address the global refugee crisis. What refugees from Myanmar or South Sudan experience in regard to their interaction with the United States is quite different from what Ukrainians have experienced in the Biden administration's Uniting for Ukraine initiative. Yet, they too are people worthy of welcome.

Not only are refugees worthy of welcome, but it is also a demonstrated fact that refugees add value to communities across the United States. Refugees graduate from our public schools and colleges. Refugees buy homes, open small businesses, create jobs, pay taxes, join community organizations and faith groups, and much more. Refugees give back to the communities that welcome them. Refugees are a good investment.

Please do what it takes to rebuild the U.S. refugee resettlement program.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Susan Gunn
 Director



Robyn Boerstling

Vice President

Infrastructure, Innovation and Human Resources Policy

March 24, 2023

The Honorable Alex Padilla
Chairman
Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship
and Border Safety
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Cornyn
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship
and Border Safety
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Padilla and Ranking Member Cornyn,

The National Association of Manufacturers is the largest manufacturing association in the United States, representing businesses in every industrial sector and in all 50 states. Manufacturing employs 13 million Americans, contributes \$2.81 trillion to the U.S. economy annually and has one of the largest sectoral multipliers in the economy. Taken alone, manufacturing in the United States would be the eighth-largest economy in the world.

Manufacturing in the United States depends on a strong workforce to innovate and succeed. Employees in manufacturing earn 18% more in pay and benefits than workers in other industries and 99% of manufacturers offer health benefits. Despite competitive wages and benefits, manufacturers continue to face a workforce crisis, with job openings in the sector averaging just more than 840,000 per month over the past 12 months. In a recent NAM Manufacturers Outlook Survey, nearly 76% of manufacturing leaders listed attracting and retaining a quality workforce as a primary business challenge.¹

Labor shortages impact every aspect of business and have led 45% of manufacturers to turn away new opportunities simply because they did not have the workforce.² The current labor crisis is expected to intensify. A recent study by Deloitte and the Manufacturing Institute, the workforce development and education partner of the NAM, found that over the next decade, 4 million manufacturing jobs will need to be filled, yet 2.1 million could go unfilled if more people are not brought into the industry. The cost of those missing jobs could potentially total \$1 trillion in 2030 alone.³ Simply put, the U.S. has a math problem; there are not enough workers domestically to fill vacant positions and immigration must play a role in bridging the gap.

The NAM welcomes the subcommittee's hearing on Living Up to America's Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program because manufacturers believe the future of America's economy and manufacturers' competitiveness will be determined in part by the future of immigration policy. One of the many ways we can fill open jobs and keep our economy moving is through welcoming immigrants into our workforce. Manufacturers all over the country have taken a leadership role in their communities to be part of the solution by

¹ <https://www.nam.org/2022-fourth-quarter-manufacturers-outlook-survey/>

² https://www.themanufacturinginstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/DI_ERI-The-workforce-experience-in-manufacturing-Does-manufacturing-need-to-recast-its-image_final-copy-1.pdf

³ https://www.themanufacturinginstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/DI_ERI-Beyond-reskilling-in-manufacturing-1.pdf

welcoming refugees to their teams. Husco, a manufacturer in Wisconsin, welcomed Burmese team members, individuals who fled violence and are now an integral part of the company's success. Following this success, Husco seized the opportunity to recruit and employ refugees from Afghanistan. Their experiences can and should be replicated with employers around the country.

Manufacturers have a tradition of welcoming refugees' talent and hard work to their teams, either on their own initiative or through the Manufacturing Institute's work with Tent Partnership for Refugees to connect manufacturers and refugee populations seeking work. In addition to employment, manufacturers have provided these individuals with resources such as legal support to navigate the road to citizenship, financial services and classes to learn English.

Manufacturers believe immigration is a part of the workforce solution and to build a stronger, more prosperous America, the NAM's "[A Way Forward](#)" immigration plan provides a framework to address the problems created by our current federal immigration policy and fix the issues once and for all. We released this proposal in 2019 with the goal of unifying a fractured country and re-released this proposal with updated data in 2022. Four years later, with persistent labor challenges, an ongoing humanitarian challenge at the southern border and asylum seekers from war-torn countries seeking refuge, the need for immigration reform remains critical. A copy of "A Way Forward" is included in this submission to the committee.

A comprehensive solution will require compromise and increasing refugee populations should be part of that compromise. Moreover, we believe our plan can serve as a roadmap for the way forward, including for efforts to advance incremental reform measures. For decades, the NAM has worked with policymakers from across the ideological spectrum to craft policies that encourage the growth of manufacturing in the United States. Immigration reform is one of those policies.

Moving beyond the current divide to develop and enact solutions will improve our economic competitiveness and strengthen faith in our institutions. It will also give so many individuals who deserve it a chance to participate fully in our society and fortify U.S. competitiveness. We look forward to working with you to advance lasting solutions.

Sincerely,



Robyn M. Boerstling

Statement for the Record
U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary Hearing on
“Living Up to America’s Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee
Admissions Program”
March 22, 2023

The National Immigration Forum (Forum) for forty years has advocated for the value of immigrants and immigration to the nation. The Forum plays a leading role in the national debate about immigration, knitting together innovative alliances across diverse faith, labor, law enforcement, security, veterans, and business constituencies in communities across the country. Coming together under the Forum’s leadership, these alliances develop and execute legislative and administrative policy positions and advocacy strategies. Leveraging our policy, advocacy and communications expertise, the Forum works for comprehensive immigration reform, sound border security policies, balanced enforcement of immigration laws, and ensuring that new Americans have the opportunities, skills, and status to reach their full potential.

The National Immigration Forum appreciates the opportunity to provide its views on the need to bolster the U.S. refugee resettlement program, which provides vulnerable individuals fleeing violence with safe haven in the United States. The refugee resettlement program is a long-standing humanitarian effort consistent with our nation’s core values. Our nation, in turn, has benefitted from resettled refugees who make positive contributions within our local communities and to the U.S. economy. For these reasons, the Forum strongly supports continued refugee resettlement and exploring ways to improve and expand refugee resettlement efforts in the United States.

The refugee resettlement system has struggled to rebuild from COVID-19 and Trump-era budgetary and capacity cuts. As a candidate, President Biden had [pledged](#) to raise the resettlement ceiling to 125,000 and to reverse a trend of historic resettlement lows set by the previous presidential administration. On September 20, 2021, President Biden submitted [a report](#) to Congress documenting his intention to raise the annual refugee resettlement ceiling to 125,000 refugees for fiscal year (FY) 2022 and in October, 2021 the administration publicly followed through on that promise. [For FY2023](#), the Biden Administration again set the resettlement ceiling to 125,000 refugees.

While there have been some encouraging successes, including new and exciting [private sponsorship efforts](#), much work remains to be done to rebuild the refugee resettlement program. Even as refugee resettlement agencies have made progress rebuilding capacity, the Biden administration has lagged in resettling refugees, and has continued to fall far short of its targets. Experts [estimated](#) that even with the many challenges faced by the refugee resettlement program, the U.S. should have been able to resettle 50,000 refugees by the end of FY2021. Instead, the U.S. resettled just 11,411 in FY2021. In FY2022, the number of refugees resettled increased slightly to 25,465. Five months into this current fiscal year, the U.S. has only resettled 12,307 refugees and is on track to resettle approximately 29,537 refugees in FY2023, far from the 125,000 ceiling.

Congress and the Biden administration must work together to continue to rebuild the U.S. refugee resettlement program. As the Forum has [noted previously](#), there are multiple steps the

U.S. can take to address the refugee resettlement backlog and expedite the refugee admissions program to ensure that 125,000 is an achievable goal for annual refugee resettlement:

1. Provide needed funding and support to proactively secure and rebuild the domestic resettlement infrastructure. Create funding mechanisms that provide resettlement agencies the long-term stability and confidence to build capacity and open offices around the country.
2. Rebuild capacity at USCIS to conduct circuit rides. Ramp up both in-person and virtual circuit rides to over 200 a year. Expand the number of Authorized Refugee Corp Staff to five hundred and beyond. This would include providing supplemental funding to USCIS to expand their capacity.
3. Empower a central entity to better coordinate efforts and trim unnecessary steps in the refugee vetting process. The National Vetting Governance Board (NVGB) has the potential to play a critical oversight role in refugee vetting procedures.
4. Create new ways to enter the U.S. refugee admissions process and regrow the pipeline. Create additional NGO referral pathways and establish additional, more expansive P-2 direct access programs.
5. Surge resources and staffing to underfunded divisions. In the summer of 2021, the administration surged staffing to the division involved in processing Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs), and SIV grants shot up from under 300 a month to over 3,000. The administration should do the same for poorly staffed divisions involved in refugee processing.
6. Improve transparency and report out metrics related to progress in rebuilding the resettlement system. Provide monthly updates on how many refugees are in various stages of the pipeline and describe steps taken by the NVGB.

The Forum also recommends that Congress and the Biden administration:

7. Assure the success of U.S. private refugee sponsorship programs by making them [additive](#) to the existing refugee resettlement process and include clear, straightforward requirements and oversight mechanisms for potential sponsors, while providing transparent data and outcome reporting that ensures problems can be swiftly addressed.
8. Consider adopting a [new refugee admissions methodology](#) that adapts to global resettlement needs through tying refugee settlement levels to refugees in need of resettlement (RINOR).

The Forum believes that a generous and efficient U.S. refugee resettlement policy not only helps protect the world's most vulnerable populations from violence but also strengthens the economy and helps to promote a diverse and vibrant U.S. workforce. Resettled refugees make an important contribution to the economic health of our nation, as taxpayers, consumers, business owners and workers. In fact, [U.S. businesses](#) have taken a leadership role in recognizing the value of refugees for economic growth, investing millions of dollars in programs that seek to [train](#) and employ qualified refugees to fill workforce gaps.

Finally, the Forum notes that the public continues to show strong support for refugee resettlement. According to a [recent poll](#) by the Forum and the Bullfinch Group, 68% of Americans support "the U.S. providing refuge for individuals and families fleeing serious persecution and torture." In addition, 71% agree that "welcoming newcomers to our communities is an American value."

Given the contributions made by refugees, the importance of refugee resettlement in upholding American values, and continued public support for refugees, it is even more important that Congress and the Biden administration work together to rebuild and improve U.S. refugee resettlement.



Statement of the Refugee Advocacy Lab

Submitted to the Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Safety

Hearing: "Living Up to America's Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program"

March 22, 2023

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a statement for this timely hearing.

There has never been a more urgent time for a robust U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has reported that a record-breaking 103 million people are now forcibly displaced worldwide, 32.5 million of whom are registered as refugees. More than half of those registered are children. The United Nations [estimates](#) that more than 2 million people will be in urgent need of resettlement this year—a 36 percent increase from 2022.

Since establishing the U.S. refugee program in 1980, the United States has been a global leader in welcoming people seeking safety, and until recent years we resettled the largest number of refugees annually. Unfortunately, in FY 2021, the United States resettled the lowest number of people in the history of the refugee program. And while the Biden administration set a laudable goal of resettling 125,000 people in FY 2022, only 25,465 refugees were admitted. This is a disservice not only to America's commitment to be a beacon of safety and hope, but to the thousands of communities across the country who have seen how welcoming refugees enrich the United States.

Americans support refugee resettlement. In a recent [poll](#) conducted by the Refugee Advocacy Lab and Data for Progress, we found that 70 percent of likely voters across demographics and party lines believe that the United States should have a refugee resettlement program. That support jumps to 89 percent for voters who personally know a refugee.

Accepting refugees is not only the right thing to do, it's the smart thing. Refugees have invigorated our economies, brought innovation, and strengthened our communities through their contributions to our public life and cultural institutions. [In 2019](#), 96 percent of refugees across

America were employed, paid more than \$26 billion in taxes, and held more than \$73 billion in spending power. As communities across the United States struggle with labor shortages, aging populations, and other challenges, welcoming refugees is a much-needed boon to our economy. It is in the best interest of the American people, and our reputation globally, to renew and rebuild our commitment to resettling refugees.

Rebuild the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program

The U.S. government must rapidly strengthen refugee reception capabilities in order to meet our goal of resettling 125,000 people this fiscal year—no small feat given that four months into the year we’ve resettled fewer than 15,000 people. Resettlement offers refugees an important *permanent* pathway to safety. The recent pivot by the United States towards offering temporary pathways over resettlement, as we observed in the U.S. evacuation of Afghans and the Uniting for Ukraine program, for example, is the direct result of an underfunded resettlement process that cannot adequately scale-up during emergencies. While humanitarian parole is an important tool, it should not replace American investment in our resettlement program.

Implement a National Refugee and Immigrant Welcoming and Inclusion Strategy

Through our work at the state and local level with refugee communities, resettlement agencies, elected leaders, and many other stakeholders working to advance inclusive policies, the Refugee Advocacy Lab is familiar with the barriers facing refugees as they seek to rebuild their lives in their new communities. The refugee resettlement program has traditionally prioritized self-sufficiency within the first three months post-arrival, overlooking the longer-term strategy needed to ensure newcomers have the tools and pathways they need to fully integrate and thrive in their new homes. While some states have stepped in to create policies, programs, and funding that focus on long-term integration, Congress and the administration should do more to ensure refugees can realize their full potential.

The Lab has been pleased to engage with the re-established federal Task Force on New Americans to think through solutions to ensure when people come here they have a pathway to success. Establishing a [National Office for New Americans](#) to implement a federal inclusion strategy to welcome refugees and other newcomers to this nation is a pivotal first step. A whole-of-government approach must be taken to ensure refugees and immigrants are able to access programs, services, and opportunities needed for them to succeed. Such a strategy must be developed with input from refugees and displaced people themselves, as well as state and local officials, immigrant advocacy organizations, business leaders, and other community-based groups and individuals.

Remove Unnecessary Barriers to Workforce Integration and Education

As part of a national strategy, Congress and the administration should seek to introduce and pass legislation that reduces barriers to workforce participation and access to education. The Lab applauds the recent passage of the Bridging the Gap for New Americans Act as an important first step towards examining these barriers.

Many refugees and immigrants come to this country with valuable work and educational experience that could fill critical labor shortages in the United States, from healthcare providers and teachers to STEM fields. However, many highly qualified workers are unable to practice in their fields in the United States without meeting requirements that are onerous, time-consuming, and expensive—and in some cases unrelated to their competency. Health workers, for example, who obtained their credentials in another country often have to repeat years of graduate medical training. They also have to undergo lengthy and costly credential evaluation processes, and meet English language proficiency requirements that do not reflect the language skills needed on the job. In addition, refugees who seek higher education opportunities to improve their career prospects can lose access to resettlement benefits, a harmful policy that should be repealed.

Recommendations:

As a record-breaking refugee crisis unfolds globally, we have a chance to affirm U.S. leadership and our commitments to the world and to this nation by welcoming refugees into our communities. To maintain its status as a global leader, the United States must ensure that the talents of refugees and immigrants are not wasted, by taking the following actions:

- Immediately investing to **rebuild the capacity of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program** and ensuring refugees have expanded post-arrival support to access housing, education, English and adult education programming, medical and mental healthcare, and other services essential to their successful integration.
- **Developing a national welcoming and inclusion strategy and establishing a National Office of New Americans**, with regular input from refugees and displaced people, state and local governments, immigrant advocacy organizations, business leaders, and other community-based groups and individuals.
- Passing the **Afghan Adjustment Act**, which would allow certain Afghan evacuees to have an opportunity to apply to become lawful permanent residents – the same legal status they would have received had they been admitted as refugees. Afghans who arrived since August of 2021 are already contributing their relevant professional skills to high demand U.S. industries—from engineering to healthcare—in communities across the country, and have the potential to contribute over \$1.4 billion in annual earnings.
- Passing the **Refugee Protection Act** (reintroduction forthcoming), which would restore and strengthen the refugee resettlement program and asylum protections. The bill would also expand protections to those who have assisted U.S. troops and immigrant children and families.
- Passing the **New Deal for New Americans Act** (reintroduction forthcoming), which would establish a National Office of New Americans, reduce barriers to naturalization, invest in immigrant and refugee workforce development, and improve access to legal services, English language courses, and other services.

About the Refugee Advocacy Lab

The Refugee Advocacy Lab is an initiative hosted at Refugees International and co-founded with the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP), International Rescue Committee (IRC), and Refugee Congress. The Lab's mission is to grow the movement for U.S. leadership on refugee protection and inclusion. Centered in the perspective and leadership of displaced people

themselves, we support the advocacy community by developing strategic communications resources, championing inclusive policies, and building capacity for the field.



Statement of Refugee Congress

Submitted to the Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Safety, Hearing on "Living Up to America's Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program"

March 22, 2023

Thank you, honorable members of the Judiciary Committee, for the opportunity to submit a statement for this timely and critical hearing on the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.

Since establishing the bipartisan U.S. refugee program in 1980, the United States has resettled more than [3.1 million refugees](#), thriving members of our communities who make our country stronger. Since 1980, the U.S. has been a global leader in welcoming people seeking safety, giving a second chance at life to so many individuals and families who today are proud to call themselves Americans.

Today's hearing comes at a time when we face the worst humanitarian crisis in history. According to UNHCR, the number of people who have been forcibly displaced will [surpass 110 million](#) this year. Continuing the life-saving work of welcoming refugees will require a robust commitment to rebuilding and improving the resettlement program, which was all but dismantled during the previous administration, when the average number of refugees we admitted dropped from an average of 75,000 to a cap of 15,000 during FY21. This decision continues to have devastating effects on the hundreds of thousands of refugees awaiting resettlement, and it is vital that the program receives the resources it needs to be rebuilt and expanded. The Presidential Determination goal for resettling 125,000 refugees in FY22 was a positive step towards restoring the program but now, more than halfway through the fiscal year, we have resettled less than 30,000 refugees.

As an organization built and led by people who came to the U.S. seeking safety, we know - and many of us have experienced firsthand - that the resettlement program faces great challenges. Refugee resettlement is a pillar of American values. Given how integral refugees are to the cultural, humanitarian, and economic fabric of our communities, we also know how critical it is that we overcome these challenges.

Refugees use every opportunity to give back to the country that provided them with a new home, and with safety. During the height of the Covid 19 pandemic, refugees were on the frontlines, delivering food, contributing to scientific innovation, serving as essential healthcare workers, and taking care of families in need. Refugee doctors and nurses [risked their lives](#) to keep communities safe and healthy, many doing so as volunteers, while their medical degrees were not recognized in the U.S. This is why we commend Congress for passing the bipartisan [Bridging the Gap for](#)

[New Americans Act](#) last fall, which requires the U.S. Department of Labor to study employment barriers for immigrants and refugees with international credentials.

In 2017, an [internal study](#) from the Department of Health and Human Services found that refugees over a ten year period “contributed an estimated \$269.1 billion in revenues to all levels of government” and that “the net fiscal impact of refugees was positive over the 10-year period, at \$63 billion.” Refugees are also innovators and job creators. A [study](#) from the New American Economy that same year found that the businesses of refugees generated \$4.6 billion in income during a single year - 2015. According to the American Immigration Council, refugees help “sustain and strengthen” U.S. towns, having paid \$26.1 billion in taxes - \$9.3 billion at the state and local levels.

Refugees also revitalize cities and towns by offsetting population decline and boosting economic growth nationwide by opening businesses, paying taxes, and buying homes. Many businesses would go under without refugee employees. As Mayor of Utica, NY Robert Palmieri notes: “We’ve had a rebirth into some of our older neighborhoods that were starting to decay. Refugees have come in here and revitalized them and made them a proud neighborhood once again.”

A [poll released](#) just two months ago by the Refugee Advocacy Lab and Data for Progress found that more than two-thirds of American voters across the country from different races, cultural backgrounds, education, and political affiliation, believe strongly that the U.S. should continue to have a refugee resettlement program. That number climbed to 89% when asked if people personally know a refugee.

Though the benefits of refugees to our communities have been well documented, refugee resettlement requires your renewed commitment and investment. While new temporary pathways, such as Operation Allies Welcome and Uniting for Ukraine have been used to respond to recent crises of forced displacement, they do not offer a permanent pathway and cannot replace a well-funded, robust resettlement program.

We also know firsthand the barriers that many refugees face when they arrive in the US. Current measures of refugee integration center on economic self sufficiency being achieved within a 90-day period of arrival. But a [recent report](#) from [Refugee Congress](#), [Refugee Council USA](#), and [ECDC](#), identified key integration variables that contribute to how well refugees become integrated into their new communities - English language acquisition, access to education and professional development, and access to case management services during the first critical year when refugees arrive in the U.S. For refugees to fully thrive, it is vital not only to rebuild the refugee resettlement program but to innovate as well. Working in partnership with people who have been forcibly displaced will ensure that resources are invested in the most impactful durable solutions.

As the U.S. makes strides to rebuild the refugee resettlement program, Refugee Congress recommends that Congress:

1. Exert oversight over the administration's operations of the resettlement program to welcome more refugees.
2. Invest in resources that support post-arrival support for refugee integration, including:
 - a. Funding for expanded English language education that aligns with the varying literacy needs of refugees.
 - b. Expanded professional training and skill building programs.
 - c. Access to improved mental and physical health services.

- d. Funding for the development of tools that take a holistic approach to evaluating the goals that each refugee has for themselves and their families when they arrive in the U.S., and
- e. Funding for longitudinal research that can measure progress on these goals.
- 3. Strengthen and expand refugee and asylum processing mechanisms, including expansion of equitable pathways for individuals and families seeking protection. This includes:
 - a. Investing in streamlined and concurrent processing mechanisms that address the current backlog in the resettlement pipeline and significantly reduce the processing times from the current average of more than two years.
 - b. Focusing on investment in permanent rather than temporary pathways that are additive and equitable, rather than taking a nationality-by-nationality approach that creates divisions in resource priorities.
 - c. Investing in innovation of additive complementary pathways that increase opportunities for family reunification and engage new resettlement partners such as universities and the private sector.
 - d. Expedite permanent residency cards from the current one year requirement for refugees who arrived through the resettlement program.
- 4. Pass bipartisan legislation such as the Refugee Protection Act, both of which will be reintroduced later this year, with an emphasis on legislation that would set a floor for refugee resettlement arrivals, in line with the interests and values of everyday Americans who want to welcome refugees.
- 5. Pass bipartisan legislation that provides a permanent pathway for Ukrainians and Afghans who arrived in the US under temporary humanitarian parole status. This includes the Afghan Adjustment Act, which would give Afghan evacuees an opportunity to apply to become lawful permanent residents.

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Refugee Congress (RC) is a national nonpartisan organization that is led by and promotes the well-being, inclusion, and dignity of all refugees, asylum seekers, and other vulnerable migrants. With members (Delegates) in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, we use our lived expertise to inform and influence decision-makers from local to global on critical issues that affect our communities.

Our vision is that wherever conversations take place that impact refugees and asylum-seekers, refugees and asylees are equal partners at the table – including at advisory and decision-making tables, in both paid and voluntary roles, across local, state, and national jurisdictions as well as across sectors (nonprofit, government, private). Our theory of change is simple: We believe that policies and programs will be stronger, and that solutions will be more effective, when they are informed and crafted by those who have experienced forced displacement.



Statement for the Record
Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing
*Living Up to America's Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee
Admissions Program*
March 22, 2023
Dr. Yael Schacher
Refugees International

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a statement for this timely hearing.

Refugees International is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that advocates for lifesaving assistance, human rights, and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises. We conduct fact-finding research and report on the circumstances of displaced populations globally. We do not accept any government or United Nations funding to ensure that our advocacy is impartial and independent. Refugees International strongly advocates for robust domestic resettlement as well as access to asylum in the United States.

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) provides a critical pathway to permanent status in the United States to forcibly displaced people who remain in danger even after fleeing their homes. The United States and other countries around the world are not doing enough to resettle this tiny fraction of forcibly displaced people worldwide, estimated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to be about 2 million refugees in 2023. The Biden administration resettled just over 25,000 refugees in Fiscal Year 2022, despite a Presidential Determination of 125,000. The United States simply must do better—not only because refugee resettlement is a proud national tradition and a critical component of global humanitarian leadership, but also because it greatly benefits U.S. communities who welcome refugees.

Simply put: the administration, with the support of Congress, should be using refugee resettlement for many more people. Where it cannot, it should be providing more support to refugees where they are and using parole to ensure pathways to protection for those who need it.

The current average wait time for processing through USRAP is four years, an unacceptably long time. The United States has resettled fewer than 15,000 refugees so far this fiscal year, while 200,000 people wait abroad in various stages of the pipeline. The line is especially long for

relatives of resettled refugees who are still in danger. The State Department must continue to try to increase resettlement through additional staffing, digitization, and processing efficiencies. But it must also support those in the pipeline who are waiting abroad.

The Biden administration must also bolster the resettlement pathways it has created and that, so far, has used in only very limited ways. For example, only five children have arrived in the United States as refugees (and one on parole) through the Biden administration's expanded Central American minors program, which opened for new applications in September 2021. The administration has also not yet used USRAP for refugee populations impacted by climate change, though it promised to do so two years ago. In 2023, the administration must fulfill its promise to use the resettlement program for populations it has identified as of concern such as Eritreans and the Rohingya.

The United States cannot currently process for resettlement those Afghans in Pakistan who have been referred to a P2 program created specifically for them. Why then is it not using humanitarian parole? Refugee resettlement should be used whenever possible for refugee populations, because it means that refugees will be on a path to citizenship and have the services that they need to integrate after arrival. But barriers to resettlement do not absolve the United States government from providing safe pathways to populations to whom it promised access to refuge. Congress must continue to provide support to humanitarian populations who arrive on temporary status through additional funding to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and through passage of the Afghan Adjustment Act .

Meaningful refugee participation is critical to the success of USRAP. The United States is part of a growing movement at a global level to ensure that refugees have a seat at the table when considering governance of the international refugee system. Supporting refugee participation that is substantive and sustained at the local, national, regional, and global level will make a direct contribution to making the international refugee system more effective, legitimate, and accountable. One concrete way to do this is to increase ORR grants to ethnic and community based organizations and, as proposed in the 2022 Refugee Protection Act, have the State Department fund community relations officers that focus on consultations with resettled refugees and refugee leader development. These officers can also do outreach to asylees and ensure asylees have access to services.

It is wrong to pit resettled refugees against asylum seekers at the border, as if refuge in the United States were some zero sum game and as if refugees and asylum seekers were a burden on, rather than a benefit to, U.S. society. Restrictions on access to asylum at the border separate families and leave refugees in orbit in the Americas, unable to find safety or to support themselves. We should instead be harnessing the value that refugees bring to the United States and broadening access to refugee resettlement to help alleviate demands on our asylum system.



Testimony submitted to the Senate Judiciary Committee

**Hearing on the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program
March 22, 2023**

Submitted by Talent Beyond Boundaries

Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB) is a global non-profit organization launched in 2016. TBB's mission is to open labor mobility pathways for refugees, providing a safe, legal option for displaced people to resume their careers and find durable refuge. TBB submits this testimony to highlight the potential contributions of refugees who gain safety through resettlement and who contribute to their communities. This testimony draws on TBB's expertise supporting refugees in the Middle East, Latin America, South Asia, and East Africa to relocate to Australia, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

About Talent Beyond Boundaries

TBB has partnered with governments in Australia,¹ Canada,² the United Kingdom,³ and the European Union⁴ to expand accessibility of their skilled migration programs to refugees. TBB also directly matches refugees seeking international employment with employers in

¹ Talent Beyond Boundaries, "Introducing the Australian Skilled Refugee Pilot," July 29, 2021, <https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/blog/introducing-the-australian-skilled-refugee-pilot?>

² Talent Beyond Boundaries, Evaluation key insight: Global evaluation into Labour Mobility Pathways Pilot 2016-2019, 20-21, June 26, 2020, <https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/s/TBB-Evaluation-Key-Insights-2020.pdf>.

³ Talent Beyond Boundaries, Displaced Talent Mobility Pilot overview, <https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/blog/introducing-the-uks-displaced-talent-mobility-pilot>.

⁴ IOM, Displaced Talent 4 Europe, <https://belgium.iom.int/displaced-talent-europe-dt4e>.

need of their skills, and facilitates the recruitment and migration processes for refugees as they move to third countries for international employment.⁵

Candidates have received job offers through TBB to work in many fields, including IT, consulting, nursing, and in skilled trades working as butchers and tool and die makers. As of March 2023, these programs have secured work and relocation opportunities in durable status to more than 900 refugees.

Refugee Contributions

Refugees contribute to their new communities in a wide range of ways.⁶ As is well-established by dozens of economic studies, refugees and asylees in the United States contribute significantly to local economies. Refugees are entrepreneurs at rates higher than native-born U.S. citizens and higher than other immigrants.⁷ These contributions increase over time, and far outweigh initial investments in the initial welcoming services that they receive. In fact, refugees pay on average \$21,000 in taxes than they receive in benefits over a 20-year period, totalling \$63 billion more in taxes paid than benefits received.⁸

In supporting hundreds of refugees to relocate for opportunities based on skill, TBB has demonstrated that millions have the potential to transcend displacement using their skills and fill labor gaps in countries like the United States.

The United States is facing critical labor needs. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, for example: “Even if every unemployed person with experience in the durable goods manufacturing industry were employed, the industry would fill roughly a third of the vacant jobs.”⁹ Shortages are especially critical in healthcare, where shortages impact

⁵ Durable Solutions Platform et al., Identifying Barriers and Opportunities to Labor Mobility Pathways for Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, 2022, <https://dsp-syria.org/identifying-barriers-and-opportunities-labor-mobility-pathways>.

⁶ Hamutal Bernstein, Urban Institute, Bringing Evidence to the Refugee Integration Debate, April 9, 2018, <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/bringing-evidence-refugee-integration-debate>.

⁷ New American Economy, From Struggle to Resilience: The Economic Impact of Refugees in America, June 2017, https://www.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/NAE_Refugees_V5.pdf

⁸ N.Y. Times, Rejected Report Shows Revenue Brought In by Refugees, Sept. 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/09/19/us/politics/document-Refugee-Report.html?smid=tw-share>; William N. Evans & Daniel Fitzgerald, National Bureau of Economic Research, The Economic and Social Outcomes of Refugees in the United States: Evidence from the ACS, Working Paper 23498, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w23498>.

⁹ Stephanie Ferguson, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Understanding America’s Labor Shortage: The Most Impacted Industries, Feb. 23, 2023, <https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/understanding-americas-labor-shortage-the-most-impacted-industries>.

patient safety and hospitals face “a national emergency” due to shortages in all areas, from nursing to lab workers.¹⁰

Supporting refugees to relocate benefits these companies and their surrounding communities: 93% of employers who have hired through TBB said that they were either “extremely likely” or “very likely” to recommend TBB’s program to other employers.¹¹ Employers also highlight that hiring through TBB allows them the “opportunity to achieve social impact and gain greater understanding of refugee issues.”¹² Refugees fill a needed role for their employer, and also pay taxes on their income and support other businesses through purchases in their new communities.

It must be said: refugee resettlement is not intended primarily to meet U.S. labor needs. But supporting refugees to relocate to fill vacancies advances a win-win. Families that have relocated through TBB’s programs report a 750% increase in income and report dramatic increases in their feelings of safety and security.¹³ Refugee labor mobility also benefits refugee communities outside the United States; 70% of relocated candidates send remittances to family and/or friends in difficult circumstances.¹⁴

Refugees can also fill vacancies via employment-based pathways as a measure complementary to resettlement. As noted in TBB’s October 2022 report, simple administrative policy changes can improve refugees’ access to employment-based visas.¹⁵ These recommendations include: issuing guidance to immigration adjudicators about existing flexibility in immigration law; revising State Department guidance on waivers of passport requirements; facilitating visa interviews at secure facilities with consular officials attending via video conferencing, and addressing long processing times and backlogs.

¹⁰ Steven Ross Johnson, Staff Shortages Choking U.S. Health Care System, July 28, 2022, <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2022-07-28/staff-shortages-choking-u-s-health-care-system>.

¹¹ Talent Beyond Boundaries, Evaluation Key Insight: Global Evaluation into Labour Mobility Pathways Pilot 2016-2019, 8 (June 26, 2020), <https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/s/TBB-Evaluation-Key-Insights-2020.pdf>.

¹² *Id.* at 18.

¹³ Talent Beyond Boundaries, Impact, <https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/impact?>.

¹⁴ Talent Beyond Boundaries, Impact, <https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/impact?>.

¹⁵ Talent Beyond Boundaries, Refugee Labor Mobility in the United States: Opportunities and Obstacles, Oct. 2022, <https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/blog/launching-our-new-report-on-us-refugee-labor-mobility>.

Conclusion

The United States should welcome refugees because it is the right thing to do. At our best, this country welcomes people fleeing from a fear of persecution and torture and provides them with a new home. But when we do so, it is not only refugees who benefit: our communities become more vibrant and our local economies become stronger.

Earlier this month, Ke Huy Quan received the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor his performance in the blockbuster film, “Everything, Everywhere, All at Once.” Accepting the award, he said: “My journey started on a boat, I spent a year in a refugee camp, and somehow, I ended up here, on Hollywood’s biggest stage. They say, stories like this only happen in the movies. I cannot believe it’s happening to me. This—this is the American dream!”¹⁶

The refugees who relocate to this country may become our neighbors and friends, entrepreneurs, founders of Fortune 500 companies¹⁷ – and Oscar winners. We urge Congress to continue its support for the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and to ensure that the United States continues to provide a welcome to refugees.

¹⁶ Ke Huy Quan, Ke Huy Quan Chokes Up During Well-Deserved Oscar Speech for Everything Everywhere All at Once, March 2023, <https://www.menshealth.com/entertainment/a43273563/ke-huy-quan-oscar-speech-best-supporting-actor/>.

¹⁷ Stuart Anderson, Andy Grove: Refugee, Tech Pioneer, and Immigrant Entrepreneur, March 10, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2022/03/10/andy-grove-refugee-tech-pioneer-and-immigrant-entrepreneur/>.



**VFR Statement to the Senate Judiciary Immigration Subcommittee, pertaining to its hearing
"Living Up to America's Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program"**

Voice for Refuge Action Fund (VFR) is an advocacy organization focused on representing and empowering refugee communities to engage with elected leaders at every level of government, local, state, and federal, as well as run for office themselves. Voice for Refuge Action Fund works closely with Church World Service, which also operates the Resettlement Support Center (RSC) Africa in Nairobi, Kenya that guides refugees referred to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) from sub-Saharan Africa through the U.S. resettlement process. As an action fund with expertise in working closely with resettled individuals in elected office around the country, we urge Congress to invest in our capacity to welcome and hold the administration accountable to rebuilding and strengthening our resettlement program.

VFR urges Congress to support a refugee resettlement program with capacity to address the urgency of rising displacement. Persecution and violence have forced over 100 million people to flee their homes, a number never before seen in human history. This figure includes over 32.5 million refugees, around half of whom are children under the age of 18. The fall of Kabul and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have displaced millions and demand our attention to facilitate regional and global security and our foreign policy priorities. We must also strengthen our nation's refugee resettlement system to respond more nimbly and provide life-saving assistance to those fleeing persecution from other countries, such as Syria, Venezuela, South Sudan, Burma, and so many other places around the world.

VFR calls on Congress to uplift the ways in which a robust refugee admissions program benefits America and American communities. A strong refugee resettlement system upholds our legacy as a nation of welcome and a beacon of hope to the oppressed and persecuted. It also brings enormous sociocultural and economic benefits and bolsters our national security and foreign policy objectives. At home, refugees are small business owners, job creators, tax contributors; they enrich our communities with cultural diversity; they are a crucial part of the American story. Abroad, our resettlement program is a demonstration of global humanitarian leadership, ensuring geo-political stability and setting an example for human rights and democracy.

VFR urges Congress to hold the administration accountable to rebuild and bolster the U.S. resettlement program. Two years into the Biden administration, USRAP continues to face serious challenges as it struggles to rebuild from the Trump administration and COVID-19. Actual resettlement continues to fall far behind stated admissions goals, and a sluggish and backlogged process forces many refugees to wait for years in dangerous conditions for their cases to be processed. Rather than prioritize a stronger refugee program with the capacity to respond to global resettlement in a timely manner, the administration has over-relied on temporary protections, such as humanitarian parole programs, to respond to emerging humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, Ukraine, and the Americas. A robust refugee resettlement program that meets this moment requires an increased reliance on permanent protections, such as the U.S. resettlement and asylum programs, as well as the political will and innovative solutions to clear backlogs and improve processing. This is particularly important for exception backlogs like family reunification cases, Afghan and Iraqi Priority-2 referrals who assisted the U.S. mission overseas, and others who have languished in the U.S. resettlement pipeline.

VFR urges Congress to support robust funding for refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. As Congress considers appropriations for Fiscal Year 2024, it is imperative that it provide robust funding to accounts responsible for administering USRAP, addressing processing backlogs, and providing overseas assistance and domestic integration services to refugees and displaced persons. These accounts include the Office of Refugee Resettlement's Refugee and Entrant Assistance Account, the State Department's Migrant and Refugee Assistance Account and Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance Account; USAID's International Disaster Assistance Account, and the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. It is equally imperative that the funding include oversight language to guide the use of these funds.

VFR urges Congress to enact positive legislation that strengthens the refugee resettlement program. Congress has a role in supporting positive legislation that restores and expands refugee protections and ensures needed services to those who have been resettled. Congress should support efforts like the Refugee Protection Act, the bipartisan Afghan Adjustment Act, the Guaranteed Refugee Admissions Ceiling Enhancement (GRACE) Act -- and work together on new legislation that responds to our resettlement system's changing needs.

This hearing provides a critical opportunity for Congress to reinvigorate long-established bipartisan support for our refugee admissions program, conduct needed oversight of the administration's rebuild, and commit to support refugee resettlement via robust appropriations and legislative action.