Testimony Regarding Michigan Resolution HCR 28

December 5, 2016

As the largest resettler of refugees in the state of Michigan and the fourth largest in the nation, Samaritas opposes HCR 28.

Since our organization has been welcoming refugees to Michigan since 1949, we are greatly concerned about this resolution and the precedent it sets for providing misinformation that may generate fear of refugees and refugee resettlement. While the resolution would not have legal effect, it communicates false and misleading threats and accusations and suggests that the screening refugees endure before gaining admittance to the United States is insufficient.

The security screening process is thorough, well-documented and proven to be highly effective in the course of the admission of 3 million refugees to the U.S. since 1975. It is by far the most rigorous form of screening applied to any group of people seeking admission into the United States. To suggest otherwise distracts attention from the humanitarian imperative that motivates refugee resettlement and is a hallmark of the American way.

Our opposition to this resolution exists on many levels. The United States has a deep and cherished history of providing a safe haven to people who have nowhere else to go. In fact, this country was built on the notions of freedom, asylum and welcome. Closing our doors to people fleeing terror, danger and persecution flies in the face of all that America stands for.

Economic Growth

Most refugees prove to be some of the most grateful, hard-working and proud Americans. Seventy-five percent of the refugees we welcome are self-sufficient within 180 days of arrival – despite many not having fluency in English. Our communities are welcoming and friendly, immersing refugee families into the fabric of community events, houses of worship and schools. Refugees feel immense relief that their children have a promising future here.

Two recent examples:

Louai Al-Zoubi, one of the first Syrian refugees to arrive in Michigan in 2015, came here with his wife and four children after languishing in a refugee camp in Jordan for more than two years. Against the backdrop of an American flag perched on the front door of his home, Louai proudly recounted how his family celebrates Thanksgiving, Halloween and Christmas. They celebrate all American holidays because they are so proud to become Americans. Louai works for a Ford Motor Co. supplier. His oldest son, Habeeb, who suffers from a seizure disorder, now can communicate, walk and interact in ways that he never could before coming here and receiving support services.

Nedal Al-Hayek, another early arrival from Syria in 2015, is studying agricultural engineering and plans to open a restaurant and farm. He, with his wife and two children, ran a large farm and beekeeping business in Syria with great success and now, as Americans, they are eager to contribute to the economy in innovative and strategic ways that build our communities. Nedal endured torture and jail for opposing the government in a peaceful protest in Syria. After his release, he was told he could no longer remain safe in Syria and had to flee with his young family. They witnessed horrific scenes on their way to Jordan – dead bodies along the roadside, bombed by government forces. Nedal feared for his children's safety and hoped he would eventually find a place where they could live freely and with promise. His two children, ages 2.5 and 6, speak fluent English, attend local schools and are happy, thriving children. His wife is learning English and working toward her GED.

The long-term impact of refugees on our communities is profound. They are hard-working, humble, dedicated and attentive to detail. Most refugees are eager to work at any job, even if it's not in their chosen profession, so that they can be self-sufficient. What's more, we see a high number of refugees becoming entrepreneurs, creating new revenue streams for our economy and creating jobs for our citizens.

Twenty years ago, the Latic family came here as refugees from Bosnia – mother, four brothers and two sisters. Today, they run a thriving trucking business in Warren and are community anchors, contributing to schools, organizations and supporting the general welfare of their community. Forty percent of their employees are refugees or immigrants.

Community Strength

Despite anti-refugee rhetoric, we find most people welcoming and enthusiastic about helping families in need. Our staff and volunteers guide New Americans in all the necessary assessments they need to acclimate to life here.

Samaritas New American staff work fluidly with many governments, individual leaders and a far-reaching, statewide interfaith network, including the following:

Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties:

- In January of 2016, Samaritas hosted a delegation of legislators as part of the "100 elected officials in Michigan to sign the Stand Strong, Respect Michigan pledge." Participants had the opportunity to learn about refugee resettlement efforts and meet Syrian refugees. They were inspired by their stories and how much they love America and want to contribute to our society.
- Partnering with the governments and individual leaders in each of the three metro Detroit counties, Samaritas also collaborates with diversity inclusion organizations such as One Macomb.
- For two consecutive years, the City of Sterling Heights awarded Samaritas staff its Diversity Distinction Award.
- Samaritas partners with Chambers of Commerce and a variety of school districts and ethnic community organizations to support refugees.
- The City of Detroit Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs works closely with Samaritas and other agencies on a strategy to welcome refugees in the City of Detroit. Mayor Mike Duggan himself has visited some refugee families to welcome them to Detroit. In addition, Samaritas works collaboratively with various departments within the City of Detroit government to organize community events, and Samaritas collaborates with Wayne County Department of Health, Veterans and Community Wellness and Wayne County Economic Development Corporation.
- Samaritas is a dedicated partner in developing a Southeast Michigan Refugee Collaborative, a partnership of all local refugee resettlement agencies, including Global Detroit and Welcoming Michigan, ACCESS, ACC, Chaldean Community Foundation, One Macomb and more, with quarterly consultation meetings.

Kent, Kalamazoo, and Calhoun counties:

- The Freedom Flight Refugee Task Force is a decades-old, Grand Rapids tradition featuring a quarterly meeting of resettlement agencies, public schools, public health, private medical providers, landlords and faith representatives who meet to discuss important refugee issues, best practices, and challenges.
- In partnership with Battle Creek, Samaritas facilitates the Serving Burmese Families Committee, a bi-monthly networking meeting in Battle Creek, which includes representatives from public school and public health sectors, mutual assistance agencies, Calhoun County Sheriff Department, and city officials.
- For 16 years, Samaritas has formally partnered with the Kent County Health Department to share refugee health information and successfully screen incoming refugees, and with the Calhoun County Health Department for 10 years.
- Refugee Health Collaborative, a sub-committee of the Freedom Flight task force in Grand Rapids, meets quarterly to discuss and implement best practice strategies for refugee health screening and follow up medical care.
- In January of 2016, Samaritas hosted a site visit by Battle Creek and Kalamazoo City Commissioners Kate Flores, Kaytee Faris, Andy Helmboldt, Nathan Grajek, and Larry Provenchar.

Summary

Today, the world is witnessing the highest levels of displacement ever recorded, with 65.3 million people forced from their homes - 21.3 million of whom are refugees. More than half of all refugees today are younger than 18, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html). Twelve percent of the world's refugees come to the Americas.

Our organization resettles individuals who have been cleared by first the United Nations and then the Department of Homeland Security, in partnership with the Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services and Episcopal Migration Ministries.

Michigan welcomes refugees who have been selected by federal agencies and approved through rigorous vetting processes internationally and nationally. View this White House infographic for more information.

The most shared value of the Abrahamic faiths, which serve as the foundation for our nation's moral code, is the mandate to *welcome the stranger & love thy neighbor.*

This imperative is mentioned no fewer than 36 times in Judeo-Christian Scriptures: "you know the feelings of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9)

"The stranger who dwells with you shall be like a native among you" (Leviticus 19:33-34)

Jesus taught us to "love our neighbor as ourselves" (Matthew 22:39)

The same is true in Islam: "...do good to the neighbor who is near of kin, the neighbor who is a stranger, the wayfarer" (Quran 4:36)

As people of faith, we urge our legislators on local, state and federal levels to remember the values on which this country was founded and uphold our moral obligation to provide protection to individuals fleeing persecution. Our nation has a long and proud history of living out the moral imperative to protect the most vulnerable and offer compassion and justice to all. Samaritas supports all efforts toward ensuring that American policies and programs protect and welcome refugees as we always have.

Submitted by:

Vickie Thompson-Sandy
President
Samaritas