Statement for the Record on
House Concurrent Resolution 28

Michigan House of Representatives
Committee on Local Government
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By: Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

Introduction

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) appreciates the opportunity to submit a statement for the record in light of this committee's consideration of House Concurrent Resolution 28 (HCR 28). LIRS is a faith-based nonprofit that resettles refugees as part of the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). We are submitting information about the extensive vetting process for refugee screening and to provide background information on how LIRS partners with Samaritas and Bethany Christian Services to resettle refugees in Michigan.

As the national organization founded by Lutherans to serve uprooted people more than 75 years ago, LIRS is committed to helping those who have been forced to flee their homes in finding protection and a safe place to call home. Following God's call in scripture to uphold justice for the sojourner, LIRS serves as a leader in calling for the protection of vulnerable migrants and refugees, including children and families. LIRS is concerned that this proposed resolution would not only put refugees in harm's way, but will also increase regional instability and national security concerns abroad.[1] Finally, LIRS wants to assure the Michigan legislature that the current refugee placement process put into place by The Refugee Resettlement Act of 1980 already requires regular consultation by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) with state and local governments, and service providers in partnership with private, nonprofit organizations. This consultative process is strictly adhered to by our resettlement partner, Samaritas.

LIRS's History of Resettlement Partnership in Michigan

For over 75 years, LIRS has worked to welcome over 500,000 refugees to the United States on behalf of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and their predecessor church bodies. In U.S. Government Fiscal Year 2016, LIRS and its refugee resettlement network partners welcomed 12,947 refugees throughout the country, including 1,187 in Michigan, to their new communities working to empower them to build safe and successful lives. Communities across the U.S. have recognized the important economic and social benefits of resettling refugees.

In Michigan, residents and Lutheran churches all across the state have played a vital role in the resettlement program and refugees have positively contributed to Michigan communities. In

[1] Letter from National Security officials to members of the U.S. Congress, http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/FormerNatSecOfficialsLetterRefugees.pdf

addition to the programming which supports refugees when they first arrive to the United States, the federal government provides monetary aid through grants to the state. Michigan also receives substantial resources from ORR to assist with employment, schools, and other social services. National Resettlement Agencies, including LIRS, and other refugee aid organizations, provide community and short term refugee support. The Michigan Refugee Assistance Program is administered by the Michigan Department of Human Services. Primary program services include cash and medical assistance, access to English as a second language classes, along with vocational and employment assistance. These services in turn equip refugees to become fully integrated into their communities and in turn serve their new communities.

Background on U.S. Refugee Program

The USRAP is authorized by the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), as amended by the Refugee Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-212). The 1980 Act provides for a uniform and secure procedure by which refugee admissions can occur across the United States and authorizes federal assistance programs for resettling refugees to thereby promote their independence and integration into their communities. The security screening process has undergone several enhancements over the decades—including most recently enhanced interagency security screening procedures that were implemented in 2008 and in 2010, and indepth screening of presence on social media.

The USRAP which is located within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) agency continually achieves its dual mission to offer resettlement opportunities to eligible refugees while safeguarding the integrity of the program and the United States' national security. To protect U.S. national security, DHS provides advanced training to its refugee adjudicators on security protocols, fraud detention and fraud prevention. In addition, each refugee considered for resettlement in the United States goes through a multi-layered screening process before coming to the United States. The entire process can take anywhere from eighteen months to two years. These processes include multiple biographic and biometric checks by U.S. security vetting agencies which are routinely updated, in-person interviews with trained adjudication's officers and 'pre- departure' checks.[2] No case is finally approved until results from all security checks have been received and analyzed. Ultimately, if there is any doubt about whether a potential applicant poses a security threat, he or she will not be admitted into the United States.

Resettlement in a third country is considered a durable solution and a last resort for only a small fraction of the world's most vulnerable refugees. LIRS is proud to be one of nine organizations that partners with the federal government, particularly the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) and the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to be a part of this solution.

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[2] Screening Process for Refugee Entry, available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/11/20/infographic-screening-process-refugee-entry-united-states; see also, written testimony by USCIS Refugee Asylum and International Operations Refugee Affair Division Chief and USCIS Fraud Detection & National Security Assoc. Dir. Before U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, https://www.dhs.gov/news/2015/10/01/written-testimony-uscis-senate-judiciary-subcommittee-immigration-and-national

The USRAP offers refugees safe haven and a chance at a new life, while also bringing tangible benefits to the communities that welcome them. Having endured incredible hardship and unimaginable horrors in their home countries, refugees often spend years exiled in host countries once they flee, awaiting the opportunity to rebuild their lives. Once they are resettled in a third country, refugees routinely become engaged and productive community members, contributing economically, socially, and spiritually to our communities. The support of welcoming communities, congregations, volunteers, employers, schools, foster families and others makes resettlement a successful public-private partnership. The federal government, particularly PRM and ORR, and state and local governments and our local partners play a vital role.

Concerning HCR 28

LIRS understands and respects the fundamental responsibility of local government officials to ensure their communities' safety, security, and health are ensured. LIRS partners with communities across the country in doing this every day. However, HCR 28 fails to take into account the partnerships that have long existed between local partners and governments, national organizations, and the U.S Government. This resolution falsely states that refugees are being resettled in Michigan "without any assurance that the Federal government has established and implemented a system to properly screen individuals". This could not be further from the truth. As described above, refugees considered for resettlement by the U.S. must pass through a long series of security screenings, with multiple Federal departments and agencies involved. The process ensures that all those who enter the U.S. do not pose a security risk. These robust screenings include both biographic and biometric checks. Ultimately, if there is any doubt about whether a potential applicant poses a security threat, he or she will simply not be admitted into the U.S – no matter the extenuating circumstances.

The resolution further states that "it remains to be established that the Office of Refugee Resettlement has met the requirements of the law by regularly meeting with either state or local officials regarding refugee resettlement." On the contrary, LIRS' partner, Samaritas regularly consults with local and state government around refugee resettlement capacity, arrivals, community concerns and other pertinent issues. Formal consultations take place on a quarterly basis, however there are continual and ongoing consultations throughout the year. Moreover, no court or other competent authority has ever found that the ORR or any other actors in the resettlement process in Michigan are in violation of local consultation provisions of the Refugee Act. Our partners in Michigan have long worked with local, state, and federal officials to ensure that our programs are in complete compliance with the law and take into account local needs. In fact, our resettlement partners across the country regularly meet to ensure that refugees are resettled in the communities that are best positioned to receive them. That is the reason that refugee resettlement is successful and refugee resettlement couldn't succeed without regularly partnering with local communities.

Conclusion

LIRS strongly believes that at a time when global displacement has never been higher, we cannot close the door or our hearts on refugees, the most vulnerable among us. As people of faith, we are called on to love our neighbors and to welcome the refugee, the foreigner, and the stranger.

Jesus himself was a refugee, and taught us that when we welcome a stranger, we welcome him. Let us stand together and advocate for more compassionate, hospitable, and just policies for refugees and migrants - not close the door on them when they are most in need. We pray that our leaders will act to uphold our nation's long and generous tradition of welcoming the stranger. Our countries and communities are stronger when we do so.

We would encourage members of the committee to contact our local partners to learn more about the work they do in their communities and the process by which refugees are resettled in Michigan.