



Refugee Congress Statement to the U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary, as it Pertains to the Hearing on The Current State of the U.S. Refugee Program on February 27, 2020

As a national nonpartisan organization built and led by refugees, asylum-seekers, and other vulnerable migrants, Refugee Congress knows firsthand the importance of the refugee resettlement program.

The refugee resettlement program provides a safe home to refugees like us, who have fled violence and persecution in our home countries. We have faced danger and persecution due to religion, race/ethnicity, nationality, membership in a social group, or political opinion.

Refugees go through a lengthy and rigorous security vetting process that takes approximately two years and involves numerous U.S. governmental agencies. This process includes screening by eight federal agencies, including the Department of State, Department of Homeland Security, and the FBI; six security database checks and biometric security checks screened against U.S. federal databases; medical screening; and three in-person interviews with Department of Homeland Security Officers.¹

Once here, refugees develop connections in our new homes, and we quickly become thriving, contributing members of our communities. We get jobs, start new businesses, make friends, join local places of worship, and volunteer to help others.

The average workforce participation rate for refugees is nearly 82 percent, well above the national rate of 62 percent.² Refugees earn more than \$77 billion in household income and paid almost \$21 billion in taxes in 2015.³ A study by the University of Michigan and Global Detroit found that refugees contribute up to \$295 million to that region's economy alone each year.⁴

Refugee Congress Delegates across the country provide an illustration of the types of economic contributions we make. Our Delegates work as teachers from elementary school to college. We are award-winning employees at Fortune 500 companies, directors of service agencies, entrepreneurs and small-business owners, civil servants, journalists, religious leaders, tour guides, and more.

As Biar Atem, Refugee Congress Board Member and Delegate for Nevada, recently said, "Refugees bring a spirit of gratitude to this country." We approach our new home with a determination to succeed and a desire to give back. We pursue education and job certifications, and we put in the time and energy to work our way up, sometimes from entry-level and unskilled labor positions to award-winning managerial positions. We also volunteer with local

¹ "Refugees in America," USA for UNHCR, <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/usa/>.

² "Refugee Integration & Economic Contributions to the United States," Refugee Council USA, <https://rcusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Refugee-Integration-Economic-Contributions.pdf>.

³ "From Struggle to Resilience: The Economic Impact of Refugees in America," New American Economy, <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/from-struggle-to-resilience-the-economic-impact-of-refugees-in-america/>.

⁴ "Global Detroit, U-M release study: Refugees infuse up to \$295M/year in SE Michigan," Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan, <http://fordschool.umich.edu/news/2017/global-detroit-u-m-release-study-refugees-infuse-295m-year-southeast-michigan>.

nonprofits, serve on committees at our children's schools, and start new service organizations to assist others -- both immigrants and native-born Americans.

The refugee resettlement program also plays an important role in U.S. foreign policy and national security interests. Through resettling refugees here, the U.S. can influence other countries to provide safe haven to large populations of displaced people coming from nearby, helping prevent unrest and danger.⁵

In recent years, the number of refugees worldwide has been growing, reaching nearly 26 million last year.⁶ The gap between refugees who need resettlement and those who are resettled has widened. According to the UNHCR, less than one percent of the refugees in need are resettled each year.⁷

Here in the U.S., our tradition of welcome for refugees and our commitment to the popular refugee resettlement program is threatened. The current Administration has taken steps to dismantle and undermine the program, placing refugees at risk and preventing the many economic, foreign policy, cultural, and civic advantages of refugee resettlement.

Since 1980, U.S. presidents have set an average annual refugee admissions goal of 95,000 and have resettled an average of 80,000 per year. In contrast, the current Administration set an admissions cap of just 18,000 for 2020 and allowed local jurisdiction to block refugee resettlement.

These and other actions threaten the refugee resettlement program and wellbeing of refugees in the U.S. and around the world. They threaten the opportunities for refugees like us to find a home after fleeing persecution and to contribute to our new communities and country in the many ways we do every day.

We urge all Members of Congress to reverse the recent trends that threaten refugee resettlement and commit to upholding America's long tradition as a country of safe haven, where refugees fleeing violence and persecution can build new lives and contribute to their new communities.

Below are biographies from several of our Refugee Congress Delegates, which we hope will provide a sense of the diversity and contributions refugees bring to this country.

⁵ "How Robust Refugee Protection Policies Can Strengthen Human and National Security," Center for Migration Studies, <https://cmsny.org/publications/imhs-refugee-protection-security/>.

⁶ "Figures at a Glance," UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

⁷ "Resettlement," UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/resettlement.html>.

REFUGEE CONGRESS



Dauda Sesay

Louisiana

Resettled refugee from Sierra Leone

Dauda Sesay was born in a small town in the northern part of Sierra Leone. At 16, he fled his homeland due to a terrible war that led to the massacre of his father and seven-year-old sister, who was burned to death.

Sesay was shot and seriously injured by the rebels. He was admitted and stayed in a refugee camp in the Gambia for nearly nine years.

During his time there, he advocated for better living conditions for refugees at the camp and for education for the children.

When his injury required further surgery, he moved to the capital, Banjul, where he met his wife, who is also a refugee. Due to the continued deterioration of his medical condition, he and his family (including his 6-month-old daughter) were resettled to the U.S. by Catholic Charities in May of 2009.

In the United States, Sesay is a community advocate, husband, and caring father to five beautiful children. Upon arrival, he made learning English and acquiring education a top priority for himself and his family. He earned a degree in Applied Science in Process Technology from Baton Rouge Community College, and currently works at Dow Chemical.

Sesay is a founding member and president of Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants (LORI,) a community-based nonprofit comprised of refugees, asylees, and other vulnerable immigrants, assisting other refugees and immigrants with integration into the United States. He is also a member of the Mayor Sharon Weston Broome International Relations Commission and Chairperson of the Commission Culture and Art Engagement, which was established to make the City of Baton Rouge a more inclusive and welcoming place.



Julia Ostropolsky

Missouri

Resettled refugee from the USSR

Julia Ostropolsky, MSW, LCSW, arrived in the U.S. with her parents as a stateless refugee near the end of the Soviet era.

She graduated from the University of Toledo and received her Masters in Social Work from Washington University, and then began working with the Russian-Jewish community in St. Louis County. Julia identified a significant gap in

services for limited-English-speaking communities, especially for the older members of these communities.

Shortly thereafter, Julia – together with fellow refugee Svetlana Miretsky – founded Bilingual International Assistant Services to establish a system of holistic care that would meet the needs of all seniors, regardless of language and origin. Since 2002, Bilingual International has grown steadily and branched out into many different communities and areas of service provision.

As she watches the organization she founded grow with pride, Julia continues to advocate for the foreign-born on numerous professional boards and committees.



Biar Atem

Nevada

Resettled refugee from South Sudan

Biar Atem was born in South Sudan and was forced to abandon his family and village when civil war threatened his life. At age seven, Atem became a child refugee and walked more than 1,000 miles before reaching a refugee camp in Kenya, spending the next 13 years in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya before Catholic Charities resettled him to Las Vegas in April 2001 as a refugee.

Atem started out as a janitor with the Venetian Casino Resort in May 2001. He became a U.S. citizen in 2007 and was reunited with his family in 2008 after more than 20 years away. He worked his way up from a janitor at the Venetian to a contract audit manager with shared services at Las Vegas Sands Corp. He is now a Certified Fraud Examiner. He has been named to Fortune magazine’s “Heroes of the 500,” was a finalist for the Adelson Citizenship Award and Sands Cares Hero of the Year, and was named Community Impact Award Winner by the American Red Cross. He is also founder of the nonprofit South Sudan Center of America.

Atem is also a proud husband and a father of two sons and a daughter, and he serves on the school board at his son’s elementary school . He earned a bachelor’s degree in Accounting from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and an MBA from Regis University.



Kamal Dhimal

North Carolina

Resettled refugee from Bhutan

Kamal Dhimal is a Bhutanese refugee who was forced to flee persecution in Bhutan at the age of six after his father was imprisoned and killed. He and his family lived in a refugee camp in Nepal for twenty years before being resettled in the United States in 2010.

Dhimal now resides in Charlotte, North Carolina, where he works as a business owner. He has established the Bhutanese Community Association of Charlotte,

volunteers for the city's Immigrant Task Force, and received the Asian Community Leader Award from Asian Chamber of Commerce.



Norah Bagirinka

Ohio

Resettled refugee from Rwanda

Norah Bagirinka is a survivor of the Rwandan genocide and was resettled to the United States in 2005.

In Rwanda, she directed a program with the International Rescue Committee that aided female victims of violence. Now in the United States, Bagirinka has continued her humanitarian work by advocating for refugees and immigrants in Ohio, collaborating with organizations such as CRIS Ohio, US Together, World Relief, and the Women's Federation for World Peace Ohio Women's Fund.

In 2007, she founded Refugee Women In Action, a nonprofit organization based in Columbus, Ohio, that assists refugee women and their families to establish social and economic independence. She received a Bachelor's Degree in Healthcare Management from Ohio Christina University and currently works as the Community Outreach Specialist and Program Director for Refugee Women In Action. She also serves as a board member for the National Justice for Our Neighbors.



Joseph Sackor

Pennsylvania

Resettled refugee from Liberia

Joseph Sackor was two months away from graduating college when war broke out in Liberia and he and his family were forced to flee to neighboring Guinea. Before being resettled, Sackor served as the president of Liberia Refugee Students organization in Guinea, which provided support to UNHCR refugee schools in the early 1990s.

He was resettled to the United States in 1999, and earned his GED shortly after. Sackor went on to earn a dual Bachelor's Degree in Management Information Systems and International Business from Temple University, and a Dual Master's Degree in Management Information Systems and Public Administration from Devry University.

He currently lives in Levittown, Pennsylvania where he has worked as a senior systems analyst. Sackor is most proud of contributing to his community by organizing two medical mission trips to Liberia that brought in nearly \$6 million worth of medication and medical supplies to the country combined.