



Written Testimony of

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for

House Judiciary Committee  
Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship

“Current State of the U.S. Refugee Program”

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“In a word, it is not only the cause of migrants that is at stake; it is not just about them, but about all of us, and about the present and future of the human family. Migrants, especially those who are most vulnerable, help us to read the “signs of the times”. Through them, the Lord is calling us to conversion, to be set free from exclusivity, indifference and the throw-away culture. Through them, the Lord invites us to embrace fully our Christian life and to contribute, each according to his or her proper vocation, to the building up of a world that is more and more in accord with God’s plan.”

--Pope Francis, Message for the 105<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migrants and Refugees<sup>1</sup>

Thank you to Representative Sylvia Garcia who is leading this hearing on behalf of Subcommittee Chairwoman Zoe Lofgren and to Ranking Member Ken Buck and members of the House Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship for the opportunity to testify before you and to submit this written testimony regarding the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP).

As chairman of the Committee on Migration for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), I wish to address the importance of America’s global leadership role in accepting and integrating refugees for the last forty years. Refugees are a blessing to our country. I speak on behalf of the Catholic Church when I say that the Church teaches that every human being is created in God’s image and deserves dignity and respect. We view assisting those in need as is a fundamental Christian duty that is derived directly from the words and the life of Christ, who himself was a migrant and part of a refugee family, and that as Christians, we are called to welcome our new neighbors with the same love and compassion that we would want ourselves to be shown. In the spirit of the quote I cited from Pope Francis, the USCCB urges the U.S. government, in collaboration with civil society, including the faith-based community, to assert its traditional and strong moral international leadership -- a reflection of American values and global strategic interests -- in all phases and parts of the refugee protection system.

I am particularly conscious of the legacy of the U.S. refugee program as we approach March 17, 2020, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the enactment of the Refugee Act of 1980. The Refugee Act provides the framework for the United States to meet its domestic and international obligations to refugee protection through the two major U.S. humanitarian protection systems for refugees---asylum and resettlement. While having deep concerns about reduced access in recent years to both asylum and resettlement and urging rejuvenation of both, I will focus my remarks today on resettlement, the subject of today’s hearing.

## **I. Catholic Social Teaching and Concern, Care and Support for Migrants and Refugees**

The Catholic Church has a long history of solidarity, pastoral care, community outreach, service, and advocacy related to people migrating to the United States. Migration and Refugee Services of the USCCB (USCCB/MRS) is historically the largest U.S. refugee resettlement agency in the United States. USCCB/MRS has worked to welcome and integrate refugees, regardless of nationality, race, ethnicity, or religion. Working in partnership with the U.S. government, state and local

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 105<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2019,” Vatican, released September 29, 2019, available at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190527\\_world-migrants-day-2019.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20190527_world-migrants-day-2019.html)

governments, and local communities, USCCB/MRS has resettled over one million of the three million refugees who have come to our country since 1975.

The Catholic Church's solidarity and service related to migrants and refugees stems from the belief that every human being is created in God's image. In the Old Testament, God calls upon his people to care for the alien because of their own experience as aliens: "So, you, too, must befriend the alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 10:19). In the New Testament, the image of the migrant is seen in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. In his own life and work, Jesus identified himself with newcomers and other marginalized persons in a special way: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt. 25:35). Jesus himself was an itinerant preacher without a home of his own, and as noted, a refugee fleeing to Egypt to avoid persecution and death (Mt. 2:15).

In modern times, popes over the last 100 years have developed the Church's teaching on migration. Pope Pius XII reaffirmed the Catholic Church's commitment to care for pilgrims, aliens, refugees, and migrants of every kind, affirming that all peoples have the right to conditions worthy of human life and, if these conditions are not present, the right to migrate.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, we advocate to address the root causes for such poor conditions while also protecting those forced to migrate. In our joint pastoral letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope, A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration*, January 23, 2003, the U.S. and Mexican Catholic bishops call for nations to work toward a "globalization of solidarity." In that document, we affirm that "Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection. Those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community." (No. 99). We likewise state that refugees should "have access to appropriate due process protections consistent with international law." (No. 99).

From the beginning of his papacy, including when Pope Francis traveled to Lampedusa, Italy, he has defended the rights of refugees and migrants and called for their protection. He decried the "globalization of indifference" and the "throwaway culture" that disregards those fleeing persecution in order to seek a better life. Pope Francis also created a new Vatican department, the Dicastery to Promote Integral Human Development, to be a catalyst for Catholic collaboration in developing policies and systems to effectively address refugee and migration crises. He is personally overseeing the Migration & Refugee Section of that Dicastery as the Church seeks to improve the welcome, protection, promotion, and integration of refugees and immigrants.

## **II. Bipartisan and Community-Based History of the US Refugee Admissions Program**

At the height of World War II (1943), the U.S. bishops established War Relief Services (WRS) as the mechanism through which the Church would participate in overseas refugee and relief work. Soon after its establishment, the bishops assigned WRS with the responsibility to lead the Church's work with displaced persons abroad and extend "help to war-afflicted people, especially children, on the basis of need alone, without reference to race, creed, or other factors." By 1948, of the 119 dioceses in the U.S. at the time, 105 dioceses had a resettlement director appointed by their respective bishop.<sup>3</sup> This effort established the foundation upon which the Church's current resettlement program was built.

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Pius XII, *Exsul Familia* (On the Spiritual Care of Migrants), September 1952.

<sup>3</sup> Todd Scribner, "'Pilgrims of the Night': The American Catholic Church Responds to the Post-World War II Displaced Persons, Crisis," *American Catholic Studies* 124(3): Fall, 2013, 14.

During the next three-decades, the Church remained responsive to migration flows – often forced – that emerged under the cloud of the Cold War. From 1948 to 1952, the Church helped to resettle 190,275 persons who were displaced by the devastation of World War II, another 70,000 persons through the Refugee Relief Act of 1953 and in the aftermath of the Hungarian uprising in 1956.<sup>4</sup> Striking more closely to home, the periodic influx of Cubans following the rise of Fidel Castro reshaped the demographic and cultural identity of southern Florida. The Catholic Church in Miami, due in large part to the efforts of Catholic Relief Services and the local Catholic Charities (the social services arm of the Church), was indispensable to the reception and placement of Cubans upon their arrival.

The Catholic Church played a critical role in the Orderly Departure Program (ODP), which permitted Vietnamese immigration to the United States and other countries after the Vietnam War. Prior to the ODP, tens of thousands of “boat people” fled Vietnam monthly and to neighboring countries. From 1979 until the end of 1999 the Orderly Departure Program processed more than 523,000 Vietnamese for admission to the U.S. as refugees, immigrants, and parolees.<sup>5</sup>

By the mid-1970s, it had become apparent that the ad-hoc nature of the resettlement process needed significant revision. Different refugee populations received different levels of support; the parole power of the Executive branch raised concerns within Congress that the President was effectively skirting immigration law and admitting migrant populations outside the Congressionally established system of admissions. The differentiated nature of the program was an important contributing factor to the passage of The Refugee Act of 1980, which standardized the system through which refugees were admitted, clarified the objectives of the program, regularized assistance programs for refugees, and delineated the roles and responsibilities of federal and private agencies responsible for resettlement. Since 1980, the U.S. Refugee Admissions program has received broad, bipartisan support, with the annual admissions goal averaging 95,000 each year.<sup>6</sup>

The current resettlement system in the U.S. is an expansive public-private partnership with longstanding commitments from a broad group of faith-based organizations, including Jewish, Episcopal, Catholic, Lutheran, and Evangelical faiths, as well as secular non-governmental organizations. Each involved entity raises private money, cultivates in-kind donations from local communities, and volunteers matching federal dollars.

USCCB/MRS operates the Parishes Organized to Welcome Immigrants and Refugees (POWIR) program throughout its resettlement network to strengthen parish and community support for newcomer populations. In the first 8 months of 2019, 23 POWIR programs engaged over 131 parishes, identified and trained 1,579 new volunteers, and formed 162 new community partnerships.<sup>7</sup>

### **III. Contributions of Refugees to the United States**

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<sup>4</sup> Scribner, 19.

<sup>5</sup> The U.S. Department of State, “Fact Sheet: Refugee Admissions Program from East Asia”, January 16, 2004, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/prm/rls/fs/2004/28212.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> See Migration Policy Institute, *U.S. Annual Refugee Resettlement Ceilings and Number of Refugees Admitted since 1980*, available at <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-annual-refugee-resettlement-ceilings-and-number-refugees-admitted-united>.

<sup>7</sup> This data is derived from internal USCCB/MRS survey results of participating POWIR Programs. More detail is available upon request.

As explained above, our call to resettle refugees is deeply ingrained in Catholic social teaching and thought which is based off of our Catholic faith and in the teaching of Jesus Christ. We believe that every human life is sacred and entitled to protection and human dignity. It is our responsibility to help refugees not based on their achievements or contributions but because they are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Despite this fundamental underpinning of our approach to resettlement, my brother Bishops and I feel that it is important to highlight the amazing accomplishments and contributions of refugees who have been resettled here in the United States.

In addition to the many fine refugee families we have been blessed to assist through our Catholic Charities' network, there are some truly noteworthy refugees whose accomplishments have changed the face of U.S. and global history important to mention. Such U.S. refugees include Albert Einstein, Henry Kissinger, Madeleine Albright, and Sergey Brin (founder of Google), As well as countless other contributors to U.S. society. A recent study<sup>8</sup> highlighted the profound, positive economic impact of refugees collectively.

Refugees:

- earn \$77.2 billion and pay taxes of \$20.9 billion, annually;
- earn initial median household wages of \$22,000 per year and in 25 years, averages \$67,000;
- earn as entrepreneurs \$4.6 billion annually, as 13% of refugees start their own businesses;
- share collective spending power of over \$1 billion in each of 18 U.S. states for a total of \$57.4 billion, including \$17.2 billion in California and \$4.6 billion in Texas; and
- provide part of the solution for future tax support to address the aging of America as 49.7% of U.S. born people are of working age, while 77.1% of refugees are of working age.<sup>9</sup>

#### **IV. Recommendations**

As noted above, the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program is a long-standing public-private partnership that has provided life-saving protection to millions of individuals fleeing violence, political turmoil and religious persecution. Understanding the pivotal moment that the program finds itself; we respectfully request Congress to consider the following recommendations:

- urge the Administration to ensure that the Fiscal Year 2020 admission goal of 18,000 refugees is met;
- urge the Administration to return the refugee admissions goal in future years to a level consistent with global need and traditional U.S. global humanitarian leadership, that is, at least 95,000, the historical norm over the past 40 years of the USRAP;
- maintain robust appropriations levels related to accounts that support the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program; and
- recognize the unique and vital role that faith-based organizations and faith communities play in welcoming and integrating refugees.

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<sup>8</sup> *From Struggle to Resilience*, New American Economy, June 2017, p. 2, available at [https://www.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/NAE\\_Refugees\\_V5.pdf](https://www.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/NAE_Refugees_V5.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Id. at 20.

**A. Congress must strongly encourage the Administration to reach its Fiscal Year 2020 refugee admission goal of 18,000**

In recent years, the numbers of the refugee program have dramatically dropped. While these lower numbers were stated to be resulting from increased and improved vetting, we which appreciate and recognize as important, it has been disheartening to see the numbers of refugees arriving continually not meet the Presidential Determination number that has been given. To this point, there was a Presidential Determination in Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 of 110,000 refugees, and only 53,716 were resettled; in FY 2018 there was a Presidential Determination of 45,000 and only 22,491 were resettled.<sup>10</sup> In FY 2019 there was a Presidential Determination of 30,000 and while we were dismayed at the low number of refugees allowed by the President to be resettled in 2019, we were grateful that the U.S. government resettled all 30,000 in FY 2019. <sup>11</sup>We are hopeful that this may be something to build on, in terms of ensuring that the goal number is likely to be met in future years going forward. However, despite the increasingly low number of refugees allowed to be resettled in the United States, (this year another reduction to 18,000), we are currently not on track to reach that resettlement goal. As of February 21, 2020, there have been 5,792 refugees resettled.<sup>12</sup> If this pace is continued, we will only be resettling 14,682 refugees in Fiscal Year 2020. As a country we can and must do better to help those in need.

To help ensure that we are able to resettle 18,000 refugees this year, we encourage Congress to conduct robust oversight into the resettlement program. We urge Congress to help troubleshoot areas within the Department of State and Department of Homeland Security that are leading to delays for refugees to reunite with families living here in the United States. We remind Congress and the Administration that refugee resettlement is reserved for the most vulnerable who have vital need to leave their precarious and dangerous living situations, such as religious or ethnic or social minorities who are as unsafe in the neighboring host country as they were in their home country. It includes unaccompanied refugee children in child-headed households, women at risk, victims of torture and human trafficking, and the elderly. These most vulnerable populations need our help immediately, and we, along with the other voluntary agencies, stand ready to work with you and with the Administration to ensure that together we reach this year's goal of 18,000 refugee admissions.

**B. Given the unprecedented level of global need, and the U.S.'s historic leadership role in the world, we need to return to the historic average for resettling refugees**

While urging the Administration to use every one of the 18,000 designated admission slots in FY 2020, we also urge that the Administration build admissions back up to a level commensurate with the global resettlement need, to at least the 95,000 average.<sup>13</sup> Given the extremely high levels

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<sup>10</sup> *Justification of Estimates for Appropriations Committees FY2021*, Administration of Children and Family, Department of Health and Human Services, p 39, available at [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/olab/fy\\_2021\\_congressional\\_justification.pdf?nocache=1581352571](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/olab/fy_2021_congressional_justification.pdf?nocache=1581352571)

<sup>11</sup> President Trump, *Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions FY2019*, Federal Register, 10/4/2018, available at <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2018/11/01/2018-24135/presidential-determination-on-refugee-admissions-for-fiscal-year-2019>

<sup>12</sup> Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS), , Department of State, available at <https://wrapsnet.org> (Information publicly available on wrapsnet; also, USCCB can provide upon request).

<sup>13</sup> 95,000 is the average PD number for the USRAP from 1980 to 2016. With an ever-rising resettlement need, our response should be consistent with need and leadership, and at least "average". Also, 95,000 is the minimum annual goal also called for in H.R. 2146/S.1088, The GRACE Act, which USCCB and RCUSA support. See S.1088, available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1088>

of displacement globally and the U.S.'s traditional leadership role in humanitarian assistance through aid and programs such as refugee resettlement, it is vital that the U.S. refugee admission program is restored to the historical levels.

Currently there is unprecedented migration-related displacement throughout the world. As of June 2019, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that there was forced displacement of over 70.8 million people globally, with over 25.9 million individuals considered refugees who have fled to other countries.<sup>14</sup> For the majority of the refugees, the solution is to either voluntarily return home when returning can be done in safety and dignity or integrating into a nearby refugee host country. Resettlement to a third country is a last resort. For 2020, UNHCR identified that over 1.44 million of the 25.9 million refugees need access to resettlement, up from 1.2 million in need of resettlement in 2016.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, despite a documented rising need for resettlement, the current global resettlement capacity is decreasing. For example, in 2018, UNHCR referred only 81,337 refugees for resettlement, a nearly 50% reduction from 162,500 referred in 2016.<sup>16</sup> The U.S., in its dramatic reduction of refugees, has greatly contributed to the reduced capacity, with an over 70% reduction in U.S. arrivals from 85,000 in 2016 to 22,500 in 2018. With maximum arrivals to the United States in 2020 of 18,000, we will soon be experiencing an almost 80% reduction in U.S. resettlement since 2016. It is important to note that in prior Republican and Democratic administrations, the State Department worked with UNHCR to help grow the number of countries globally who would resettle refugees. As these new programs begin to gain strength, the United States is abruptly moving in the opposite direction, drastically cutting back on resettlement. We fear that other nations will follow suit and that even more vulnerable refugees will be left behind.

The U.S.'s retreat from global leadership in this area has great consequences not only to the annual number of refugees that other countries will resettle but also as resettlement is used as a diplomatic tool, there are far reaching effects in global and regional stability. This (hopefully temporary) reduction in U.S. leadership also comes at a time when there are several world crises which have large components of forced migration, including in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in Africa, Syria and Iraq in the Middle East, and Venezuela in Latin America.

- In Africa, for example, the U.S. has previously played a key responsibility-sharing role through resettlement for the many refugees from the DRC. The largest African refugee resettlement population includes those fleeing from DRC, and many of them are Christians fleeing ethnic and religious persecution. From FY 2016 to FY 2019, the total U.S. resettlement out of Africa has fallen 49% from 31,624 to 16,366.<sup>17</sup>
- In the Middle East, the arrivals from 2016 to 2019 have fallen 92%, from 35,555 to 2801.<sup>18</sup> On the humanitarian level, many Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities fleeing from Syria and Iraq will lose access to resettlement.

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<sup>14</sup> UNHCR, *Global Forced Displacement in 2018*, June 2019, p 2, available at <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/statistics/unhcrstats/5d08d7ee7/unhcr-global-trends-2018.html>

<sup>15</sup> UNHCR, *Global Resettlement Needs 2020*, June 2019, p 12, available at <https://www.unhcr.org/5d1384047.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS), Department of State, , available at <https://wrapsnet.org> (This report is publicly available on wrapsnet; USCCB will also provide it upon request).

<sup>18</sup> WRAPS, Department of State, available at <https://wrapsnet.org> (This report is publicly available on wrapsnet; USCCB will also provide it upon request).

- Lastly, forced displacement in Venezuela may soon even exceed that of the Syrian crisis. UNHCR projects that the number of Venezuelans forced to flee their country will reach 6.5 million by the end of 2020.<sup>19</sup>

Reducing our leadership role in these situations potentially leaves a vacuum with not only negative humanitarian consequences but also negative strategic consequences. Given the life-saving nature of the resettlement program, the heightened global need, and the vital strategic leadership role the United States has occupied, we urge a return to the historical average numbers of the resettlement program.

### **C. Maintain and Increase Funding for the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program**

Robust funding needs to be in place to ensure the continued operation and hopeful return to historical refugee resettlement admission norms. First, we commend the bipartisan efforts of Senate and House appropriators and lawmakers to ensure existing funding for refugee resettlement admissions and domestic implementation. We are grateful to see the maintenance of bipartisan humanitarian focused support for the refugee resettlement program. Second, we urge continued support and funding for the Department of State which deals with the overseas admissions elements of the refugee resettlement program and for the Department of Labor, Health, and Human Services which funds the domestic integration and short term support of refugees once they have arrived to the United States. To fully support the international element of the U.S. refugee admissions program, in FY 2021, we are asking Congress appropriate \$3.604 billion for the Department of State’s Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account, \$1 million for the Department’s Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA) account, and \$4.52 billion for the International Disaster Assistance (IDA). To ensure that the Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement can adequately serve these vulnerable populations of concern, we are requesting \$4.692 billion for the Refugee Entrant and Assistance (REA) account. Such funding is to maintain robust levels of funding to meet the ongoing work of local U.S. communities welcoming not only refugees but others suffering from the global displacement crisis—such as asylum seekers, Cubans and Haitians, unaccompanied children, survivors of torture and human trafficking.

### **D. Recognize the unique and vital role that faith-based organizations and faith communities play in refugee resettlement and integrating newcomers**

We urge Congress and the Administration to continue to recognize and understand the overwhelming support that various faith-based groups have exhibited for the United States refugee admissions program. As noted, our Christian faith tradition and Catholic social teaching urges us to welcome the refugee, however, it is noted that many other faith-based groups also resettle refugees. It is important to note that six of the nine voluntary agencies resettling refugees in partnership with the federal government are faith-based. In addition to our programmatic experience and expertise to caring for refugees, faith-based groups are uniquely situated to support refugee resettlement and welcome refugees into American communities through their dioceses, parishes, congregations and synagogues. Resettling refugees and welcoming individuals at the local level in communities of faith is a tradition that we have been engaging in for many years and continue to do. An example of the

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<sup>19</sup> Danny Bahar, Meagan Dooley, *Venezuela refugee crisis to become the largest and most underfunded in modern history*, Brookings, 12/9/2020, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2019/12/09/venezuela-refugee-crisis-to-become-the-largest-and-most-underfunded-in-modern-history/>



strong support of local communities for refugees can be seen in the recent efforts to comply with the President's Executive Order requiring consent for resettlement from governors and local county executives. Before the current preliminary injunction was put in place, 43 states had consented to resettlement and faith groups played a very prominent role in almost every state to help secure that consent.<sup>20</sup> In addition to being active supporters, communities of faith work to help to integrate refugees into their local communities and equip them and their families up for success in our country. In the Archdiocese of Washington, there are several parishes who have sponsored and supported refugee families who have come to the United States via the U.S. resettlement program. It is a profound and powerful experience to be able to personally witness the welcoming of the stranger, one of the core elements of our faith, because it allows us to see the love and compassion that our faith calls us to express and live out in our lives. We urge Congress and this Administration and future Administrations to recognize the unique and vital role that we as faith-based entities play in this important program.

#### **IV. Conclusion.**

Thank you for the opportunity to share our insights, our long-standing commitment and historic work with refugees to our country, and our analysis. We respectfully urge the Subcommittee to pursue these recommendations.

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<sup>20</sup> The Texas governor said he would not consent, and governors from Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina had not yet made decisions. Wyoming has no refugee resettlement program.