



**Statement of Lavinia Limón, President and CEO,
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI)
Senate Homeland Security Committee
Hearing on “The Impact of ISIS on the Homeland and Refugee Resettlement”**

November 19, 2015

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Carper and honorable Committee members, on behalf of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), a national non-profit organization serving refugees and immigrants with a network of over 90 agencies and offices across the nation, I submit our testimony in support of the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program and to provide information on the program.

First, our sincerest condolences to the families of the victims in the Paris attacks. Our thoughts are with them in this difficult time. Refugees across the U.S. who fled persecution and violence submit their condolences as well. Those who have sought refuge in Europe and the Middle East, understand the suffering of Parisians well because they have lived it every day. They too are the victims of the brutal actions of ISIS.

For over 100 years the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) has protected the rights and addressed the needs of persons in forced or voluntary migration worldwide and supported their transition to a dignified life. We help the uprooted by facilitating and providing direct professional services, and promoting the full participation of migrants in community life. We understand the impacts of terrorist acts, because we have seen them firsthand in our work with refugees fleeing terrorist persecution.

We are proud to do this work in the United States because our country is a world leader in providing protection to people who need it. Our heritage is to show compassion for victims of persecution and this is what we will continue to do. The global refugee crisis requires strong leadership and the U.S. will inherently make a statement by our presence or absence. For refugees who are the most vulnerable even after fleeing their countries: torture survivors; women at-risk; those with complex medical situations, for these individuals resettlement might be the only option. For refugees who have languished in camps without the right to work, with children denied education, with the daily betrayal of basic human rights, these are the individuals for whom we must stand. We must not let these heinous acts in Paris make us turn our backs on children and families when our opportunity is to welcome refugees in the U.S. We must not forget our own country was founded by refugees fleeing religious persecution.

A Solutions-Based Approach

Based on our experience we have the following recommendations:

1. Support the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program as a safe, humanitarian and foreign policy operation.
2. Increase funding for the Department of Homeland Security to maintain the integrity of security checks.
3. Increase support for the Office of Refugee Resettlement to enhance the integration of newly arrived refugees.

Continue the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program because it is safe

As the former Director of the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement I am familiar with the security checks that refugees must undergo prior to their arrival to the U.S. and am confident that our vetting system works. Unlike the current situation in Europe, the U.S. gets to choose which refugees we admit. Refugees coming in through the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program must pass through a many-layered review which includes an in-depth, in-person interview by well-trained Homeland Security officers; and multiple highly rigorous background checks, including biographic and biometric investigations, using multiple databases. The FBI, DHS, and National Intelligence Agencies each run their own investigation. The security screenings occur at multiple points in the process and there is ongoing, recurring vetting. Syrians also go through an enhanced review with U.S. Customs and Immigration Services. Refugees also pass a health screening to ensure they don't have a contagious medical condition.

Less than 1% of refugees are resettled worldwide. There are more than 4 million Syrian refugees, and the US has resettled a little over 2,000 since the civil war began in 2011. While our resettlement impact has been small, it has demonstrated to other countries the importance of making opportunity for those who cannot return home.

Governors stating they will not allow refugees in their states is un-American and against the law. Profiling and screening solely on the basis of religious or racial characteristics would, in our view, be discriminatory and inappropriate. Freedom of movement is a constitutionally protected right of all persons and it has consistently been upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court. The federal government has the exclusive power to regulate immigration and any state law that conflicts with federal law is illegal according to the Supremacy Clause of the Constitution which made federal law "the supreme law of the land." States cannot determine the federal government's refugee policy or prevent people from moving to their states, but governors can make Syrians feel unwelcome -- which would break down a system that relies on community support. From its inception, the U.S. Refugee Resettlement program has been a public/private partnership relying on the welcoming intentions of communities, individuals and states.

USCRI also thanks President Obama for his leadership in continuing to support the resettlement of refugees. USCRI stands with the President's statement that, "The people who are fleeing Syria are the most harmed by terrorism. They are the most vulnerable as a consequence to civil war and strife. We do not close our hearts to these victims of such violence and somehow start equating the issue of refugees with the issue of terrorism."

Increase funding for the Department of Homeland Security to maintain the integrity of security checks

Beginning in 2011, additional security checks were implemented for refugees seeking admission to the United States, resulting in severe disruptions in refugee travel, unclear and erroneous results, and a 'looping' effect where some checks expire while refugees wait in line for the next step in the process. This has made it nearly impossible for many to travel, which can result in further harm as they wait. There are at least three to five different biometric and biographic security checks performed depending on the applicant's age, gender, and country of nationality. The administration should consolidate security checks to replace the current system of overlapping checks that expire while others are conducted. A comprehensive biographic and biometric check acceptable to all agencies would improve efficiency, processing, and the protection of refugees. Also, cases in which one person's checks are holding up their family or cross-referenced case should be told their options so they can make well-informed decisions about their family's future. Additional interview officers will enable the system to maintain its rigorous nature without redundancy and waste. USCRI shares the interest in keeping the refugee program safe as our network of agencies and staff work with refugees every day.

Increase support for the Office of Refugee Resettlement to enhance integration

Resettled refugees make significant economic and cultural contributions to their new communities. An increase in funding for the Office of Refugee Resettlement to ensure adequate, stable and sustainable resources and programming for newly arrived refugees will only improve these outcomes. Ensure that efforts are pursued to encourage and equip refugees for naturalization by increasing the number of civic engagement programs and access to English language training. Congress should strongly consider funding the Matching Grant Program at higher levels. The Match Grant program enables refugees and other eligible individuals to become self-sufficient without resorting to federal or state assistance programs. A variety of programs support newcomers but are without sufficient or secure funding. This includes Ethnic & Community Based Organizations, Preferred Communities, Elderly Programs, Home Childcare, Refugee Agricultural Partnership, Microenterprise, Individual Development Account, Cuban-Haitian, Technical & Training Assistance, and School Impact grants.

The Need to Act

As a nation of immigrants, we know better than most the importance of providing hope and opportunity to those fleeing persecution and expect our government to continue to demonstrate leadership on this issue. We cannot continue to stand by while refugees are in need of life-saving

protection. I welcome any questions or opportunity to meet to discuss the program and our recommendations further. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Attachments:

USCRI Refugee Security Screening Backgrounder

USCRI Refugee Flow Chart