

Statement of Ranking Member Tom Carper
“Canada’s Fast-Track Refugee Plan: Unanswered Questions and Implications for U.S. National Security”

Wednesday, February 3, 2016

As prepared for delivery:

In November, this committee held a hearing on our country’s ability to screen Syrian refugees. At the time, there was great unease over the Syrian refugee population and the security risks some believed they might pose.

We learned a lot at that hearing.

We learned that the screening for refugees takes place wholly overseas before the refugee ever sets foot on U.S. soil.

We learned that the United Nations High Commission on Refugees winnows down the list of potential refugees long before the United States ever considers a single application.

We learned that once we receive a list of pre-screened refugees from the United Nations, the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security still conduct their own extensive vetting. This vetting includes biometric and biographic checks, health checks and in-person interviews conducted by immigration analysts trained to spot fraud.

We also learned that refugees are consistently vetted against the full repository of U.S. national security databases.

And we learned that our program focuses on the most vulnerable refugees, mostly children and families. It is no wonder that the security experts who testified before our committee said the refugee resettlement program is probably the last way a potential terrorist would try to come to our country.

Today, we will learn more about the Canadian refugee program. From what I can tell, it is a lot like ours.

Like us, Canada carefully screens potential candidates while they are overseas. They also run their own security checks. Indeed, those checks include systematic consultation with the United States and vetting against our terrorism and national security databases under information sharing agreements we have in place with Canada.

It’s true that Canada is doing this screening faster than usual, but that does not mean it is doing less than they previously had done.

The Canadian government has surged resources to speed up the time of refugee processing, and states emphatically that it is not cutting corners.

In fact, all the members of this Committee recently received a letter from the Canadian ambassador to the U.S. laying out the screening process for these refugees and the close cooperation with our own security and border agencies. I'd like to place that letter in the record now.

The first group of refugees Canada is reviewing is restricted to families, women, and other at-risk populations. I should also point out that, with very few exceptions, almost no single, fighting-age males are being considered in this first batch of 25,000 refugees.

Moreover, nearly half of the refugees are privately sponsored – that is, families or organizations in Canada have committed to helping them adjust to life in that country and even pay to support them for the first year.

That kind of arrangement can be very helpful in integrating new arrivals and helping safeguard against alienation or radicalization.

Like our country, Canada has a long, proud history of helping refugees. In fact, some of the Southeast Asian refugees resettled in Canada in earlier decades are now stepping up to sponsor Syrian families.

Finally, it is very important to point out that it would take four years before refugees living in Canada are potentially eligible for citizenship and the right to travel visa-free to the United States. Until then, they would need a visa to come to our country and, then, be subject to fresh screening against U.S. criminal and intelligence databases before they can cross our borders.

In short, I think we should support our ally Canada in doing the right thing in the most secure manner possible when it comes to Syrian refugees.

And as we do that, let's keep our eye on the ball. Vilifying refugees coming to the United States or Canada only serves as a distraction from the real challenge of defeating ISIS on the battlefield and combatting homegrown violent extremism here on our shores.

Providing safe haven for a few of the millions of people victimized by ISIS and the Syrian war will not hurt that cause, I believe it can actually help us.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing. I look forward to learning more from our witnesses.