May 20, 2020

The Hon. Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker,  
House of Representatives  
Washington DC 20515

The Hon. Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader,  
Senate  
Washington DC 20515

The Hon. Kevin McCarthy,  
Minority Leader,  
House of Representatives  
Washington DC 20515

The. Hon Chuck Schumer  
Minority Leader,  
Senate  
Washington DC 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer and Minority Leader McCarthy,

As bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), a denomination of 3.5 million people of faith, and as the CEOs of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and Lutheran Services in America we thank you for acting quickly to pass the previous COVID-19 bills, and we also take this opportunity to call on you to work together with urgency to pass the next COVID-19 response package that includes protections for all our nation’s immigrant community.

In the ELCA, we are aware of the gifts our new neighbors bring and of the barriers as well as the opportunities they encounter. According to the teaching of our tradition, all people are God’s creatures for whom Christ died, and it is our responsibility to respect the human dignity of all.

The important role that immigrants play in the United States is being driven home by the coronavirus pandemic which has forced hundreds of millions of Americans to remain at home while tens of millions more continue to report to work to keep the country running. To help policymakers make decisions at this time, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has listed our “Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce” that describes the types of positions in the workforce that are “critical to public health and safety, as well as economic and national security.”

Refugees and immigrants work in roles that the CISA deems “critical to public health and safety, as well as economic and national security” at a higher rate than the U.S. population overall. For instance: (1) Approximately, 31 percent of refugees and immigrants work in building, grounds cleaning and
maintenance occupations; (2) **25 percent** in construction and extraction; and (3) **38 percent** work in the farming, fishing, and forestry sector.¹

According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s 2017 National Agricultural Workers Survey, **half of all farmworkers are undocumented**, making their contributions essential to ensuring that the nation’s food supply is uninterrupted. Moreover, **nearly one-third** of all recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and more than **130,000** Temporary Protected Status (TPS) holders are in occupations classified as essential through the CISA criteria.

To ensure an effective and sustained recovery, the next COVID-19 stimulus bill should include the following provisions aimed at extending protections to all immigrants and their families.

1. Ensure that all people residing in the U.S. have access to COVID-19 testing and treatment regardless of immigration status. We teach that governments have a moral, God-given, obligation to provide leadership and coordination to ensure there is equitable access to healthcare, with special attention to the needs of the marginalized. Guaranteeing access brings social, economic and epidemiological benefits as well.

2. Everyone who files tax returns should have access to the emergency economic support being made available to all Americans. This must include the **16.7 million people** in mixed-status families in the U.S., as well as DACA recipients, TPS holders and undocumented workers, who are disproportionately likely to be essential workers risking their lives on the frontlines of the pandemic. As such, they are critical to preserving public health and supporting the systems that allow millions of Americans to observe social-distancing rules by remaining at home.

3. Ensure that immigrant workers are not unnecessarily removed from the workforce at this critical moment due to expiration of their permission to work in the U.S. and that people with desperately needed specialized skills have the opportunity to use them. Congress should automatically extend work authorizations for at least those individuals whose documents recently have expired or are set to expire in 2020.

4. Suspend the public charge rule as a criterion in immigration applications. Despite U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services guidance clarifying that testing, treatment and preventive care related to COVID-19 will not be considered in future public charge determinations, the confusion surrounding the details is nevertheless discouraging even those who are entirely unaffected by the public charge rule—including U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents—from seeking health care and essential services.

5. Guarantee that the fear of immigration enforcement does not stand in the way of individuals accessing necessary services for themselves and their family members. To date, the administration has not issued a formal statement (as it had been done during the Flint water crisis) declaring that its highest priorities will be promoting life-saving and life-sustaining activities, including by not conducting any immigration enforcement actions at or near hospitals, health care facilities and other COVID-19 testing or quarantine sites or against people traveling to such sites. Additionally, as COVID-19 continues to spread in alarming fashion

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¹ Undocumented immigrants comprised 5 percent of the workforce in 2016, according to a study from Pew Research Center, “U.S. unauthorized immigration population estimates, 2016”.
within immigration detention facilities around the country, Congress should ensure that meaningful changes take place without further delay.

ELCA social teaching understands that immigration, refugee, and asylum policies express who we are as a nation, influence the nation’s future character, and affect the lives of millions of people. Immigrants and refugees are valued members of our congregations and communities. Banning or suspending protections during a global pandemic contradicts our commitments as a church and as a nation to be a place of welcome and safety.

Extending assistance to workers who are refugees and immigrants recognizes that they make up a significant portion of the workforce and also supply it with labor in sectors that are critical to ensuring that the U.S. successfully combats the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting economic recession. Ensuring that all people have access to necessary testing and treatment—as well as the legal and financial support to remain home when they are sick or may have been exposed to the coronavirus—is critical to the nation’s effort to stanch community spread and beat this virus. We are all in this together.

To that end, we ask for your work on ensuring that the next COVID-19 response package extends its protections and benefits to all of those who contribute to our nation regardless of immigration status. Thank you for your service in Congress and to our nation.

Sincerely,

Krish O’Mara Vignarajah
President and CEO
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton
Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Bishop Tracie Bartholomew
Chair of the Conference of Bishops
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Charlotte Haberaecker
President and CEO
Lutheran Services in America

1. Bishop Jon Anderson
Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Redwood Falls, MN 56283

2. Bishop James Arends
La Crosse Area Synod
La Crosse, WI 54601

3. Bishop Tracie Bartholomew
New Jersey Synod
Hamilton Square, NJ 8690

4. Bishop Susan Briner
Southwestern Texas Synod
Seguin, TX 78155

5. Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee
Northwest Washington Synod
Seattle, WA 98103

6. Bishop Michael Burk
Southeastern Iowa Synod
Iowa City, IA 52245
7. Bishop Laurie Larson Caesar  
Oregon Synod  
Portland, Oregon 97227

9. Bishop Jeffrey Clements  
Northern Illinois Synod  
Rockford, IL 61101

11. Bishop Suzanne Darcy Dillahunt  
Southern Ohio Synod  
Columbus, OH 43215

13. Bishop James Dunlop  
Lower Susquehanna Synod  
Harrisburg, PA 17109

15. Bishop Paul Erickson  
Greater Milwaukee Synod  
Milwaukee, WI 53215

17. Bishop Katherine Finegan  
Northern Great Lakes Synod  
Marquette, WI 49855

19. Bishop Michael Girlinghouse  
Arkansas-Oklahoma Synod  
Tulsa, OK 74105

21. Bishop James Gonia  
Rocky Mountain Synod  
Denver, CO 80221

23. Bishop Lorna Halaas  
Western Iowa Synod  
Storm Lake, IA 50588

25. Bishop James Hazelwood  
New England Synod  
Worcester, MA 1607

27. Bishop Robert F. Humphrey  
Virginia Synod  
Salem, VA 24153

8. Bishop Susan Candea  
Central States Synod  
Kansas City, MO 64105

10. Bishop Yehiel Curry  
Metropolitan Chicago Synod  
Chicago, IL 60617

12. Bishop Patricia Davenport  
Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod  
Philadelphia, PA 19119

14. Bishop Paul Egensteiner  
Metropolitan New York Synod  
New York, NY 10115

16. Bishop R. Guy Erwin  
Southwest California Synod  
Glendale, CA 91205

18. Bishop William Gafkjen  
Indiana-Kentucky Synod  
Indianapolis, IN 46240

20. Bishop William Gohl  
Delaware-Maryland  
Baltimore, MD 21201

22. Bishop Erik Gronberg  
Northern Texas-Northern Louisiana Synod  
Argyle, TX 76226

24. Bishop Regina Hassanally  
Southeastern Minnesota Synod  
Rochester, MN 55901

26. Bishop Mark Holmerud  
Sierra Pacific Synod, ELCA  
Sacramento, CA 95827

28. Bishop Deborah Hutterer  
Grand Canyon Synod  
Phoenix, AZ 85020
29. Bishop Richard Jaech  
Southwestern Washington Synod  
Tacoma, WA 98444

30. Bishop Laurie Jungling  
Montana Synod  
Great Falls, MT 59405

31. Bishop Kristen Kuempel  
Northwest Intermountain Synod  
Spokane, WA 99202

32. Bishop John Macholz  
Upstate New York Synod  
East Syracuse, NY 13057

33. Bishop Gerald Mansholt  
East Central Synod of Wisconsin  
Appleton, WI 54914

34. Bishop Brian Maas  
Nebraska Synod  
Omaha, NE 68152

35. Bishop Leila Ortiz  
The Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod  
Washington, D.C. 20001

36. Bishop Michael Rinehart  
Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod  
Houston, TX 77060

37. Bishop Peter Rogness  
South-Central Synod of Wisconsin  
Madison, WI 53719

38. Bishop S. John Roth  
Central/Southern Illinois Synod  
Springfield, IL 62701

39. Deacon Sue Rothmeyer  
Secretary  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

40. Bishop Craig A. Satterlee  
North/West Lower Michigan Synod  
Lansing, MI 48906

41. Bishop Laurie Skow-Anderson  
Northwest Synod of Wisconsin  
Menomonie, WI 54751

42. Bishop Timothy Smith  
North Carolina Synod  
Salisbury, NC 28144

43. Bishop Kevin Strickland  
Southeastern Synod  
Decatur, GA 30031

44. Bishop Ann Svennungsen  
Minneapolis Area Synod  
Minneapolis, MN 55403

45. Bishop Andrew Taylor  
Pacifica Synod  
Santa Ana, CA 92701

46. Bishop Bill Tesch  
Northwestern Minnesota Synod  
Moorehead, MN 56562

47. Bishop Steven Ullestad  
Northeastern Iowa Synod  
Waverly, IA 50677

48. Bishop Shelley Wickstrom  
Alaska Synod  
Anchorage, AK 99517

49. Bishop Lawrence Wohlrabe  
Eastern North Dakota Synod  
Fargo, ND 58103

50. Bishop Herman Yoos  
South Carolina Synod  
Columbia, SC 29201

51. Bishop Samuel Zeiser  
Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod  
Allentown, PA 18109