



**Lutheran Immigration  
and Refugee Service**

**Written Statement from Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS)**

**Senate Judiciary Committee**

**A Hearing of the Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, & Border Safety**

**“Living Up to America’s Promise: The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program”**

**Wednesday, March 22, 2023**

**Dirksen Senate Office Building Room 226**

## **Introduction**

LIRS (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service) appreciates the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Security for having this timely and critical hearing on “The Need to Bolster the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.” As a faith-based organization with over 80 years of experience welcoming refugees and asylum seekers, LIRS is grateful for this opportunity to uplift the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) and provide recommendations on how it should be supported to achieve its mission of offering resettlement opportunities to persons overseas who are of special humanitarian concern.

LIRS calls for a strong USRAP through robust congressional funding, an ambitious refugee admissions target or Presidential Determination (PD) on refugee admissions, and inclusive, welcoming communities for the refugees that enter the United States. This requires the combined action of the Administration, Congress, and welcoming communities.

## **Building Capacity to Clear Backlogs and Address Global Protection Needs**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates there are more than 100 million people forcibly displaced across the globe. While most displaced people are internally displaced, 27.1 million are refugees. **The United States must prioritize strengthening our resettlement capacity and step up as a resettlement leader given [the record number of displaced people](#) globally.**

Since its establishment in 1980, USRAP has stood as a clear signal of the humanitarian leadership and resounding welcome of the United States. In recent years, however, U.S. admissions numbers have been at all-time lows. In FY21, only 11,411 refugees were admitted, the lowest since the establishment of the admissions program. In FY22, the U.S. welcomed 25,465 refugees, falling 80 percent behind the administration’s goal of 125,000. This is largely attributed to significant policy changes during the previous administration that lowered the PD and drastically diminished U.S. processing capacity globally, as well as the impacts of COVID-19.

While certain refugees have benefited from innovations in USRAP processing, more should be done to address backlogs which formed due to historic reductions in the annual refugee ceiling and the past administration’s discriminatory policies. We applaud efforts such as concurrent processing and support the expansion of this model to new locations. Further, **LIRS calls on Congress to pass the [NO BAN Act](#) which would instill guardrails on U.S. immigration and refugee programs, including by limiting executive authority to impose religion-based bans on the entry of individuals to the United States.** Other efforts to shore up and update the refugee program are dearly needed and could be resolved by the passage of the Refugee Protection Act.

We appreciate that the administration and Congress have taken many positive steps toward rebuilding USRAP and increasing its overall capacity through an investment in training and hiring of fresh staff to accommodate programmatic needs. This has notably resulted in the significant expansion of refugee resettlement in the Western Hemisphere, including for Venezuelan and Nicaraguan nationals. LIRS supports this expansion and encourages the administration to do more to protect people fleeing persecution and may otherwise be forced to make the dangerous journey to our border to save their lives while also preserving this right. More should be done to expand and protect the investments that have been made. **Congress should protect these investments by passing the [Guaranteed Refugee Admissions Ceiling Enhancement \(GRACE\) Act](#) which would set a minimum annual goal for the number of refugees to be admitted. Further, Congress should uphold the Refugee Act and abandon any efforts that would limit access to asylum.**

### **Create Credible Solutions for Those Displaced by Climate Disaster**

According to the [2021 report](#) by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, more than 7 million people across 104 countries are currently displaced by climate disaster. Nevertheless, there remains no consensus on terminology surrounding climate displaced people and no explicit language exists that provides protection for being displaced by climate disasters.

Though the Biden Administration did create the Standing Interagency Policy Process on Climate Change and Migration to handle and coordinate solutions surrounding climate mitigation and the problems of climate displacement, there have been few outcomes to this development outside of the initial consultation process. In July 2021, LIRS released [a report](#) outlining immigration pathways available to climate disaster displaced persons. LIRS is calling for the Biden Administration to provide a follow-up report on the actions of the Interagency Policy Process of Climate Change and Migration and **urging Congress to introduce legislation that will provide greater protection for people displaced by climate disaster, like Senator Markey’s Global Climate Change Resilience Strategy (S.1335), and to appropriate assistance and disaster funding for communities on the front lines of climate disaster.** Greater action from Congress and the administration is required to ensure there are durable protection pathways for groups impacted and displaced by climate disaster.

### **Improving the Efficiency and Agility of USRAP to Respond to Emergent Crises**

Over the past two years we have witnessed an outpouring of support by Americans welcoming people seeking protection after the fall of the democratically elected government in Afghanistan, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and Venezuelans fleeing the authoritarian regime. Many of these displaced persons entered the United States on parole – a lifesaving but temporary protection mechanism that has been streamlined for certain populations under the Biden administration. **We implore the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress to pass the bipartisan [Afghan Adjustment Act](#),** keeping America’s promises to our allies, assisting those left behind, and providing lasting protection to Afghans evacuated to the United States in a historic airlift in 2021. We also encourage the administration and Congress to work together to ensure USRAP is similarly streamlined and more agile to respond to urgent humanitarian situations so that people seeking protection may avail themselves of more durable pathways, without disrupting processing for people who have been awaiting processing for years.

### **Building Public Support for USRAP**

Welcoming refugees reflects our core values as a nation. When we provide pathways to individuals fleeing violence and persecution status, we honor our founding principles and demonstrate our commitment to those in need. The United States was founded largely by immigrants and refugees seeking a more just and equitable future and we benefit immensely from their contributions. In order to uphold these principles and ensure that our country builds upon its historical commitments to the international community, we must devote the necessary resources to meet USRAP goals and help serve refugees along with our allies.

LIRS, along with communities across the United States, is welcoming refugees with open arms. Through our Circle of Welcome programs, community groups partner with local resettlement agencies to provide specific services and financial support to a newly arrived refugee family. This type of volunteer commitment is incredibly important to the work of welcome and should be uplifted by Congress.

Refugees enrich our communities and our workforce. They diversify the perspectives and cultural competencies of our communities, strengthening our nation with new perspectives and expertise. As they find their footing, refugees stimulate the economy, raise productivity, improve local worker wages, boost innovation, contribute significant tax revenue, and often generate international trade because of their

connections to various countries. Refugees also become leaders in our society – some are standing Members of Congress today.

### **FY24 Appropriations Across Refugee Related Accounts**

[LIRS calls for](#) a strong USRAP through robust congressional funding across various critical government accounts for the 2024 fiscal year. Specifically, there is a need for increased capacity and funding to support the Migration and Refugee Assistance Account (MRA), International Disaster Assistance (IDA), the Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA) account, and Refugee and Entrant Assistance (REA) Account which provides critical services and funding for the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Increasing funding across these accounts will be critical to build up and sustain USRAP programming and assistance during the world's greatest refugee crisis. Specifically, REA funding is critical for the work of welcome of LIRS, and all U.S. refugee resettlement agencies, which provides services for refugees, asylum seekers, humanitarian parolees, Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders, and unaccompanied children.

At LIRS, we work every day with asylum seekers, refugees, and unaccompanied children who are arriving from across the globe due to persecution, violence, or other safety concerns. We know that [mental health services](#) and clinical support for refugees, asylum seekers, and unaccompanied children are critical for their success and wellbeing in the United States. **We urge Congress to increase funding for all refugee-related accounts, specifically REA funding which enables resettlement agencies to welcome and support arrivals.** Given the mental health toll that displacement and resettlement have on populations, we also urge Congress to increase funding for mental health services for all immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in the FY24 appropriations spending bill.

### **Conclusion**

LIRS urges Congress robustly fund USRAP and refugee related accounts during the FY24 appropriations process, think strategically about providing more protection pathways for climate disaster displaced persons, provide pathways to lawful permanent residence for Afghans and other populations arriving through humanitarian parole, work to mitigate systemic immigration backlogs, and enact positive legislation that strengthens the refugee resettlement program. **Congress should support the legislative initiatives noted above and should pass the [Refugee Protection Act](#).**

During this critical moment of record levels of displacement due to conflict, disaster, and persecution, United States humanitarian leadership is crucial. Congress plays a key role in the United States' response to this refugee crisis and LIRS urges legislators to think strategically about the ways we can sustainably welcome and support refugee and asylum seekers in the United States, and ensure we are thinking in the medium- and long- term about lasting policy solutions that will fortify the USRAP and safeguard our nation's promise to be a beacon of hope and opportunity for populations in need of refuge.

**We encourage Members of Congress to join LIRS in celebrating the resilience of refugees and our collective work of welcome on World Refugee Day, June 20<sup>th</sup> by meeting with our refugee and faith leaders, our staff, and members of supportive communities to learn more about the benefits and barriers to resettlement.**