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February 27, 2019

**House Committee on Human Services and Housing
Testimony in Support of HB2508**

Chair Keny-Guyer, Vice Chairs Sanchez and Noble, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Kelsey LeBrun Keswani, Director of Refugee Assistance and Information Network (RAIN) International. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 2508, allocating state funds towards Extended Case Management services for refugees.

We are here today because we are faced with an emergency. For the first time since the 1940's, Oregon may be shutting the doors to refugees entering our state. We may be also shutting our doors to viable support systems for refugees who already live in our state. Since early 2017, the federal government has made systematic efforts to deliberately dismantle the refugee resettlement system either directly or indirectly. Refugee resettlement is historically one of our country's proudest humanitarian systems. Let me be very clear about this: **refugee resettlement has never been a partisan issue.** It has always had bipartisan support. Ronald Regan was president when some of the highest numbers of refugees were welcomed into the country. Even in the years following 9/11, when the numbers of refugees admitted to the US dropped down to implement increased security measures, President Bush held a presidential determination ceiling at around 80,000.

There are many myths and false narratives about who refugees are and about the system of refugee resettlement. The first step towards changing a narrative is to go back to the basics and learn the facts. I'm going to list 4 of these facts today.

#1: Not everyone seeking safety or wanting a better life can be a refugee.

Less than 1% of the world's 20+ million refugees are given a chance to resettle and start a new life formally in a 3rd country. Gaining refugee status is like getting a golden ticket. You cannot step out of Syria and say "I'm a refugee and I need help" and then walk into the US and receive benefits. Refugee status is a legal status, gained overseas by the United Nations. Only the most vulnerable cases have no other options or durable solutions, are eligible for 3rd country resettlement. In fact, on average, refugees will stay 19 years in a refugee camp. Let that sink in. Whole generations of children grow up in stateless environments with no legal rights. For resettlement in the U.S., refugees are vetted by the Department of Homeland Security and are the most vetted migrant group entering the U.S. More than tourists, more than highly skilled workers, more than probably most of our relatives who came here years ago.

#2: Refugees build up our economy, fill critical employment needs, raise graduation rates, and increase diversity of host countries.



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Overwhelming data produced by economists and research institutes across the US concludes these facts, including recent data from the Brookings Institute, Migration Policy Institute, Urban Institute, universities and the US Dept of State.

- 13% of refugees are entrepreneurs, exceeding US-born and other immigrant groups as owning more small businesses. Throughout the past three decades, businesses less than five years old have been responsible for almost all the net job creation in the United States.
- On average, 57 percent of refugees own homes, also exceeding rates of other US groups.
- Refugees have been linked to playing a fundamental role in fostering international trade and investment
- Refugees are tied to revitalization of distressed neighborhoods, and the enhancement of diversity (Kallick 2015; Kallick and Mathema 2016)
- Many countries like the US whose population growth has steadied or is declining, understand the benefits refugees bring to their country in terms of diversity and economic growth
- Migrants have been found to boost work production among local populations
- Refugees who arrive as children have strong high school graduation rates and many succeed on college completion.

#3: Extended Case Management is an evidence-based model for states to become involved in the resettlement system, and has been shown to facilitate refugee employment rates, remove dependency from public benefits, and increase refugee well-being.

HB2508 is based off a similar bill in Utah passed in the late-2000's, which passed following the last downturn in refugee arrivals after 9/11. With an unprecedented concept, Utah's resettlement agencies approached the governor's office and legislators asking the state to invest in two years of Extended Case Management services for all newly arriving refugees, and thus create a more robust model of providing resettlement services. This new concept of getting state funds allocated towards resettlement recognized that refugees need critical support systems to thrive, and depending on the federal funding structure was not sufficient. Investing up front in extended case management services for two years potentially saves state money down the road, increases overall refugee health and well-being, and increases employment rates. Case management services are critical life support systems for people who have experienced some of the most horrible conditions and experiences any human can endure. Refugees often arrive with severe medical, psychological and educational needs and need support coordinating access of care for these systems. Utah's program was evaluated by research conducted by Columbia University who spent two years reviewing the program on the effectiveness of extended case management, examining correlates of wellbeing, service access, employment, and satisfaction with services, highlighting key considerations for effective post-migration services - all which were heightened as a result of these services.

A similar bill for extended case management for resettlement agencies has been passed in New York. Case Management is additionally seen as a model by the United Nations for new resettlement sites around the world. Oregon has a chance to lead this charge by implementing this evidence-based, trauma informed program that provides continuity of care for refugees post arrival in a new country.



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#4: Oregonians are passionate about welcoming refugees.

In 2015, when the image of the young Syrian child Alan Kurdi who drowned trying to reach Europe went viral, and the horrors of the Syrian war entered our collective conscious, Oregonians reached out in record numbers to refugee agencies to offer their support. In 2017, when the first executive order was released halting resettlement and creating the first travel ban, Oregonians descended upon the Portland airport by the hundreds and took to the streets, saying, no, we do not agree. Immediately following this first order, I attended an emergency meeting held at a Muslim Community Center in Tigard, and alongside more than 1000 of my fellow community members all crammed in a room, witnessed the mayors of three cities, senators, representatives, religious leaders, chiefs of police, district attorneys, all collectively saying we resist this order and we stand with our fellow refugee and immigrant brothers and sisters. In 2016, when resettlement agencies approached leaders in Salem and told them about the rising housing costs in Portland, and asked them whether refugees could be resettled in Salem, the people of Salem overwhelmingly said yes! Please! The mayor of Salem stated he wants the city to be an “international city,” and community leaders have organized one of the most impressive systems in the country, with hundreds of constituents attending monthly meetings.

This type of passion - which have also seen here today - is because we all love and believe in the richness refugees add to our communities. With more than 100 resettlement agencies closed across the country, and the rest struggling to survive, we have the chance right now to step of as a state and say we stand with refugees. **We don't want to look back at 2019 and remember it as the year Oregon stopped resettling refugees.** We want to look back on 2019 and say not only did we continue to welcome this population into Oregon, but we made our services stronger and better. With your help, we can do this.

Kelsey LeBrun Keswani has nearly 20 years of experience as a director and social worker for federally-contracted humanitarian programs across the US and globally, including refugee resettlement, anti-trafficking and unaccompanied children's programs.