

HOUSE BILL 2508
PUBLIC TESTIMONY – JOHN KAUFMANN
27-February, 2019

My name is John Kaufmann. I am retired and live in Salem. I am not representing any group or agency. I am a volunteer with Salem for Refugees and over the past three years I have helped numerous refugee families resettle in Salem in a variety of capacities.

In my opinion, the amount of support from the federal government to help these families adapt and assimilate into American society is shockingly insufficient. Many of the refugees come to the U.S. with traumatic personal experiences and PTSD, no English skills, low education levels, minimal work skills, and extreme culture shock. And yet they are expected to become self-sufficient within six months. In Salem, despite making a six-month commitment, our volunteers continue working with the families indefinitely and to the point of burnout to help these families adapt.

I am here to support House Bill 2508, and to suggest that it go further. The case management services provided by this bill are necessary and should be maintained in the face of Trump Administration cutbacks. However, while necessary, I believe case management by itself is insufficient. In particular, I think the bill should include funding to help subsidize directly (1) the cost of housing and (2) the cost of owning, maintaining, and insuring a vehicle.

Many of the families we have in Salem are very large, 8-12 family members. It is difficult to find housing for families this large, and even harder to find it at an affordable price – even with considerable assistance from staff and volunteers. There are currently four families in “crisis” in Salem who must find new housing in the next 30-60 days, but cannot find anything that meets their needs or budget. A car is critical because it makes them more self-sufficient, opens up other employment opportunities, and because of poor public transportation options in Salem. Housing and cars are the two largest costs the refugees face, and they are difficult to afford on the low-wage jobs most of the refugees have. Speaking from my experience with our current refugees, fears about how to afford rent and getting and maintaining a car can be overwhelming and demoralizing.

The funding I am suggesting does not (and should not) pay the entire cost of housing or car ownership, But it should be available to help buy down the costs where necessary – for at least two years to give them an realistic chance to get on their feet. It is possible the EITC could help, but as acknowledged in testimony earlier today, many people don’t even know it is available. In addition, while helpful, the EITC may still be insufficient to keep these large families whole, and the timing of their expenses may be such that they can’t wait to receive their credit the following April.

Perhaps the funding I am talking about could be added to the EITC as a special enhancement for refugees. Or, perhaps, it could be funneled to Catholic Charities, Lutheran Services, and Ecumenical Ministries to disburse as necessary. Providing direct financial assistance as well as the case management would help relieve these fears and give the refugees more time get on their feet and begin to adapt and assimilate into American culture.