



## Church World Service Testimony Supporting SB 718, Renewal and Expansion of Welcoming Refugees

As a 75-year old humanitarian organization representing 37 Protestant, Anglican, and Orthodox communions and 24 refugee resettlement offices across 17 states, including [Sponsors Organized to Assist Refugees](#) (SOAR), a program of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, Church World Service (CWS) writes in support of [SB 718](#), the *Renewal and Expansion of Welcoming Refugees Bill*.

**The U.S. resettlement program represents a standard of excellence that other countries around the world look to as a touchstone for their own policies.** Over 40 years ago, the U.S. Congress enacted the Refugee Act of 1980, landmark legislation that created the refugee resettlement program and instituted how the United States provides protection and a new life to some of the most vulnerable people in the world. As a pillar of our national foreign policy, the United States has been an international model providing refugees protection through public-private partnerships made up of federal, state, and local governments, national and local resettlement agencies, faith communities, civic groups, businesses, former refugees, and volunteers.

**Resettlement is the last resort for refugees who cannot safely return home or remain in the country where they first fled.** Refugee resettlement is a longstanding, life-saving American tradition that welcomes refugees who bring their innovative skills, diverse cultures, and dedicated work ethic to their new communities, improving quality of life for all. Since 1980, the annual bipartisan-supported admissions goal averaged 95,000. Yet, under the previous administration, that goal plummeted, culminating in a FY2021 goal of 15,000—an historic low. In the midst of the [worst global refugee crisis](#) in history, the absence of a stable and well-resourced resettlement program is deadly for those who have fled their homes due to violence and persecution.

**It is important for Oregon to support the refugee resettlement community while the administration rebuilds the U.S. resettlement program.** Church World Service previously [applauded](#) efforts by the Biden administration to begin restoring the United States' refugee resettlement program. In an important first step, the President's February 4, 2021 [executive action](#) set the stage for our nation's rebuilding this vital pathway for refugees and will lead to a more just, more compassionate, and more humane United States. While this was an important step, there is more to be done. Given that the previous administration dismantled the resettlement program by more than 80%, it will take several years to fully invest in the domestic and overseas infrastructure that welcomes and processes refugees. Now is a critical time for Oregon to support the refugee community, new arrivals and those who have already arrived, and help them integrate and thrive.

**Oregon set the stage for refugees to succeed** when the Oregon General Assembly passed the Welcoming Refugees Bill (HB 2508) in 2019, which made Oregon one of the first states in the country to strengthen and extend case management (ECM) services for refugee arrivals, which has served as a model for other states considering similar investments. HB 2508 stabilized resettlement capacity and enabled sites to build a unique and never-before-created partnership with Oregon's Employment Department (OED), which led to resettlement sites assisting refugee community members in filling out, completing, and filing Unemployment Insurance (UI) claims. State funding has successfully ensured that hundreds of refugees being served by resettlement agencies were able to have more equitable access to UI benefits than would have been otherwise possible. As a result the state's investment in ECM is an investment in equitable services for marginalized communities, immigrant communities, and communities of color.

**Refugees are resilient and bring immense contributions to the economy, diversity, and social fabric of the state.** Refugees are Oregonians, [serving on the frontlines](#) of the U.S. pandemic response, including as more than 176,000 healthcare workers and more than 175,000 workers in the food supply chain. However, refugees experience acute needs and certain disparities that threaten their health, well-being and success. For example, recent refugee arrivals are ineligible for the stimulus checks, as they do not meet IRS residency requirements, struggle with accessing unemployment insurance, and face barriers to other forms of COVID relief. State investment in refugees' success will go a long way to support economic self-sufficiency, such as supplementing job training, English language classes, and housing assistance.

Oregon's 2019 investment in resettlement services was critical to support refugees' success at a time when the program was facing an existential crisis. Today, we are in an important moment where we have an opportunity to rebuild the program stronger. CWS urges the Oregon General Assembly to support and pass SB 718 to help with rebuilding U.S. capacity to strengthen the refugee resettlement program.