

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

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By ESEC at 4:23 pm, Aug 05, 2019

August 5, 2019

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II
Secretary of Health and Human Services
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

The Honorable Kevin K. McAleenan
Acting Secretary of Homeland Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
245 Murray Lane, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Secretaries Pompeo, Azar, and McAleenan,

We write to you today regarding the upcoming refugee resettlement presidential determination for FY2020, and to express our sincere concerns about [reports](#) that some officials in the administration have proposed eliminating refugee resettlements for FY2020, despite humanitarian crises, including genocide, around the world.

Since its inception, the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) has resettled more than 3 million refugees to American communities in all 50 states. These refugees are part of a diverse American culture and flourishing economy.

While some Members of Congress have already expressed their displeasure with the FY2019 resettlement cap, and the lower-than-normal admittance numbers for FY2017 and FY2018, eliminating refugee admittance altogether is even more alarming. At a time when we are facing the “highest levels of displacement on record,” according to the [United Nations Refugee Agency](#), we urge you to increase the refugee resettlement cap and to admit as many refugees as possible within that cap. America has a responsibility to promote compassion and democracy around the world through assistance to vulnerable and displaced people.

As you know, individuals fleeing their countries because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion qualify for refugee status. All refugees go through a legal process and are some of the most well-vetted travelers in the world. USRAP screening includes both biometric and biographic checks, which occur at multiple stages throughout the process, including immediately after the preliminary Resettlement Support Center interview, before a refugee’s departure to the United States, and on arrival in the U.S. at a port of entry. Resources have already been devoted to vetting refugees, some of whom have been awaiting placement for months. The latest pipeline report shows nearly 9,000 refugees are at the “Ready For Departure” stage in the screening process,

and another 30,000 individuals have completed their U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) interview. Even if no other refugee started to go through the screening process, there are already enough people in line to max out this year's cap and welcome additional refugees in FY2020.

While we share the concern about the humanitarian crisis at the Southern Border, we disagree that eliminating refugee admittance would somehow alleviate the flow of individuals without proper documentation crossing between ports of entry. On the contrary, the United States has the ability to use refugee admittance to process individuals and families from Northern Triangle countries, which could allow for a decrease in asylum-seekers, especially those with children, at the border. It is inconsistent to maintain policies that promote in-country asylum and simultaneously eliminate the legal refugee process.

The USRAP program is a critical pillar of our national security and foreign policy, and enables the United States to fulfill key international commitments. Resettlement eases the burden on countries in conflict zones, which in turn increases global security and reduces the risk of refugees spending long periods of time in situations of vulnerability. Resettlement also contributes significantly to the United States' identity as a humanitarian actor in the international community, bolstering our negotiating capacities, increasing our soft power, and demonstrating the United States' continued commitment to human rights.

We were especially surprised to hear reports of the elimination or severe decrease in proposed refugee resettlement on the heels of the State Department's Second Ministerial for International Religious Freedom, where survivors of severe persecution came to the United States to share testimonies of unimaginable human rights atrocities. America has an obvious interest in demonstrating and promoting freedom of religion to the world, including accepting refugees who flee persecution because of their faith. In fact, the administration acknowledges the partnership between refugee admission and protection of inherent human rights in both the [2018 Report on International Religious Freedom](#) and the [2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices](#).

As we approach the 40th anniversary of the passing of the Refugee Act (Public Law 96-212), the benefits of resettling refugees remain clear and significant. Refugee populations significantly benefit local and national economies. Economists have found that refugees ultimately contribute billions *more* in taxes than they receive in benefits, and that refugees are more likely to start their own businesses and create jobs. In 2015 alone, more than 180,000 refugee-owned enterprises generated \$4.6 billion in business income, more than the United States' annual budget for refugee resettlement.¹

At a time when global leadership is needed more than ever to solve the complex refugee problem — both at home and abroad — the United States is well-positioned to continue its long legacy as a protector of human rights. Refugee resettlement combines the compassion of America with an important tool necessary to pursue foreign policy objectives. The United States will continue to benefit from the talent, drive, and ambition of resettled refugees who seek freedom, and the refugee resettlement determination for FY2020 should reflect those goals.

Thank you for your attention to this matter, and we look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,



James Lankford
U.S. Senator



Christopher A. Coons
U.S. Senator

¹ http://www.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/NAE_Refugees_V5.pdf



Lisa Murkowski
U.S. Senator



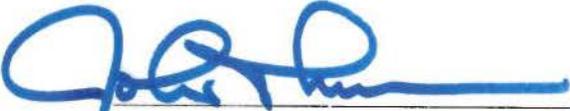
M. Michael Rounds
U.S. Senator



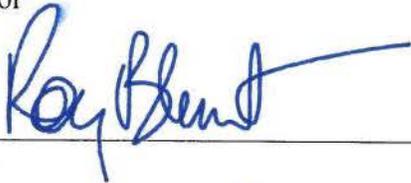
Rob Portman
U.S. Senator



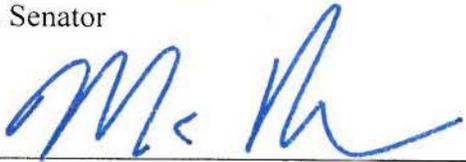
Susan M. Collins
U.S. Senator



John Thune
U.S. Senator



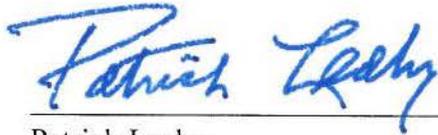
Roy Blunt
U.S. Senator



Marco Rubio
U.S. Senator



Cory Gardner
U.S. Senator



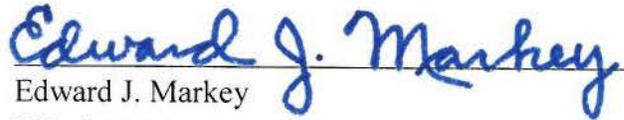
Patrick Leahy
U.S. Senator



Kirsten Gillibrand
U.S. Senator



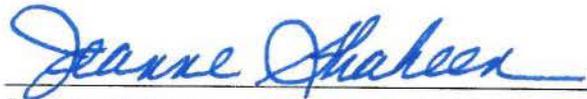
Tina Smith
U.S. Senator



Edward J. Markey
U.S. Senator



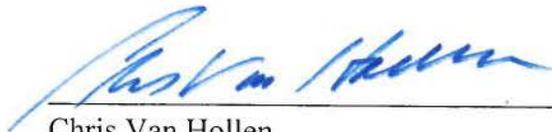
Tammy Baldwin
U.S. Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
U.S. Senator



Thomas R. Carper
U.S. Senator



Chris Van Hollen
U.S. Senator



**U.S. Citizenship
and Immigration
Services**

September 24, 2019

The Honorable James Lankford
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Lankford:

Thank you for your August 5, 2019 letter. Acting Secretary McAleenan asked that I respond on his behalf.

As you expressed in your letter, the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) has a long history of resettling refugees in the United States and reflects this country's highest values and aspirations of compassion, generosity, and leadership.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), a partner of the USRAP, remains committed to the program's mission and continues to interview refugee applicants overseas. The United States' commitment to assisting refugees extends beyond the USRAP. The United States also provides humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations around the world and offering protection to those with bona fide claims seeking asylum domestically. USCIS is working to address the challenges confronted in processing asylum requests of tens of thousands of asylum seekers in the United States. Timely processing of asylum applications is not only beneficial to legitimate asylum seekers, but also bolsters the integrity of the program and security of the American people.

Discussions regarding next fiscal year's refugee admissions ceiling are underway and will take into account the U.S. Government's holistic approach to humanitarian assistance, which includes the critical challenge of responding to the ongoing crisis at the Southwest Border. As the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) recently noted in its "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018" report: "As in 2017, the United States of America continued to be the largest recipient of new asylum applications" (p. 42), and "[t]he largest asylum-seeker population at the end of 2018 continued to be in the United States of America" (p. 47).¹ USCIS must also address its backlog of affirmative asylum cases while maintaining adequate resources to conduct credible fear screenings for asylum seekers subject to expedited removal and to conduct fear assessments for individuals who express a fear of return to Mexico during the Migrant Protection Protocols process along the Southwest Border. Addressing the affirmative asylum backlog is critical since the backlog can be exploited and used to undermine public safety, national security and the integrity of the asylum program.

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/5d08d7ee7.pdf>

The Honorable James Lankford
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Thank you again for your letter and interest in this important issue. The co-signers of your letter will receive a separate, identical response. Should you require any additional assistance, please have your staff contact the USCIS Office of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs at (202) 272-1940.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'Ken' followed by a large 'C' and the Roman numeral 'II'.

Ken Cuccinelli II
Acting Director