

CATHOLIC CONFERENCE OF OHIO

Letter Encouraging Legislative Support for Immigrants and Refugees Catholic Bishops of Ohio

April 2017

Welcoming refugees and immigrants is a significant aspect of our American heritage and a fundamental character of Ohio faith communities, including the Catholic Church. Ohio is blessed to have many refugees and immigrants in our parishes, schools and ministries. The Catholic Church in our state operates numerous programs that directly sponsor and support these newcomers.

As we listen to our pastors, principals, program directors, and more importantly, to the refugees and immigrants served by our Church's ministries, we know of many good people who are deeply concerned for their personal safety and fearful about separation from their families. These are ongoing concerns, but recent changes in federal policy have heightened such fears.

At both the state and national levels, our Church has long spoken out in favor of policies that ensure safety and compassionate treatment for immigrant and refugee persons and families in need. We continue to call upon Congress to address our broken immigration system through a comprehensive reform that improves security and creates more legal and transparent paths to immigration. As for enforcement, we do not advocate for the breaking of laws. Yet, we do urge for a more humane enforcement of these laws in a way that distinguishes between actual criminals and otherwise law-abiding, undocumented immigrant family members. We believe immigration officials should prioritize removal to those who are real threats to public safety. Likewise, most local law enforcement agencies we encounter are highly concerned about increasing trust between police and immigrant communities. Their work for public safety relies on trust between immigrants and local police and sheriff departments. We oppose efforts to pressure our state and local law enforcement to proactively enforce immigration regulations, unless public safety is truly at risk.

Ohio does not benefit from separating good families and traumatizing children in our schools who each day live in fear of finding that their mothers or fathers are no longer at home to greet them. In these instances, justice should be sought, but the punishment should be commensurate with serving the good of the family unit, which is the fundamental cell of all society. In January 2017, the chairman of our United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Migration, Bishop Joe S. Vasquez, echoed our concerns over policy shifts created by recent presidential executive orders that increase the detention and family separation of many immigrants. He wrote:

"The announced increase in immigrant detention space and immigration enforcement activities is alarming. It will tear families apart and spark fear and panic in communities. While we respect the right of our federal government to control our borders and ensure security for all Americans, we do not believe that a large-scale escalation of immigrant

detention and intensive increased use of enforcement in immigrant communities is the way to achieve those goals. Instead, we remain firm in our commitment to comprehensive, compassionate, and common-sense reform.”

In Ohio, our Church’s refugee resettlement network includes diocesan offices in Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Dayton. In 2016, we resettled over 1000 refugees. Catholic parishes and diocesan offices also work in collaboration with other refugee resettlement programs in Ohio. These programs have safely and compassionately resettled refugees from all over the world, including a small number from Syria. Measuring by the immense outpouring of support from parishioners and others in our communities towards these refugees, we believe most Ohioans who know migrants and refugees welcome newcomers with open arms and wish to see Americans offer acts of mercy. The refugee program is one of the most vetted processes for entry into the United States. We do not oppose efforts to improve on the system, should there be a need. However, the temporary shutdown of all refugee admissions, and the more than 60 percent reduction in the number of refugees who can be resettled, create a chilling effect on our ability to maintain programs and ongoing assistance. Refugees who have languished in camps for years will continue to find no relief, and a sudden temporary halt for our own agencies will likely result in significant downsizing of resources and staff.

We encourage your support for the following:

1. A comprehensive reform of our immigration laws, not just enforcement-only measures, but a reform that provides more paths for legal entry and a rational and clear cut separation of duties among federal and local law enforcement officials which does not compromise the community character of local law enforcement;
2. The BRIDGE Act: S.128/H.R. 496. (This Act will protect the dignity of DACA-eligible youth by ensuring that these individuals, who were brought to the United States as children and are contributing so much to our nation, can continue to live their lives free of the anxiety that they could be deported at any time.);
3. Efforts to persuade the administration to reestablish enforcement priorities, so that they focus more on true criminals and threats to public safety;
4. Maintaining the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program with adequate funding while further improving the vetting process.

As Pope Francis said, "To migrate is the expression of that inherent desire for the happiness proper to every human being, a happiness that is to be sought and pursued. For us Christians, all human life is an itinerant journey towards our heavenly homeland" (February 2017 *Address to Participants in the International Forum on Migration and Peace*).

Thank you for this consideration.

The Catholic Bishops of Ohio

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