

FLORIDA CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

201 WEST PARK AVENUE
TALLAHASSEE, FL 32301-7715

PHONE (850) 205-6820
FAX (850) 205-6849
WWW.FLACCB.ORG

MICHAEL B. SHEEDY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



January 25, 2017

Governor Rick Scott
Executive Office of the Governor
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Re: Recommendation to Continue Current State Coordination of Resettlement

Dear Governor Scott:

As you engage in the process of governing and recommending a budget to the legislature, you will be reviewing the work of the Department of Children and Families' Refugee Resettlement Program. This is a program in which ministries of Florida's Catholic community eagerly partner with the Department of Children and Families (DCF), with varying roles across Florida.

Background: Typical State Refugee Resettlement Programs

As you are well aware, Florida and most other states coordinate their refugee resettlement programs, working in close collaboration with the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The State Refugee Coordinator ordinarily partners with both state and local government entities and private, community-based nongovernmental organizations to actually deliver the crucial services and support to help refugees achieve early self-sufficiency.

Alternative Model: Wilson Fish

The alternative to this usual approach developed by the federal refugee program is a mechanism known as the Wilson Fish program, which can substitute one or more nongovernmental agencies to coordinate the resettlement process following the withdrawal of state coordination of the program. A transition to this model, which facilitates cooperation between the state and the new third-party coordinator or coordinators, is based on a 120-day timetable. Four (4) states, including Texas, are currently undertaking such transitions.

Florida's Refugee Resettlement Program is the Largest and Serves a Unique Population

Florida's resettlement program is the largest in the country, with over 60,000 persons resettled last year. The federally funded Florida program serves some 3,000 refugees through the U.S. Department of State Refugee Resettlement Program (RRP), and the program also serves a significantly larger number of Cuban/Haitian Entrants (some 55,000 Cubans and 3,400 Haitians in FY 2016). Through the current program, the state of Florida coordinates not only self-sufficiency services for the refugees and Cubans who have arrived but also support for the communities welcoming them. For example, this includes coordination of support for schools that will be welcoming some refugee and Cuban children into their classrooms and local and state community clinics that will be delivering preventative health care to these families. Currently, Florida enjoys significant economies of scale as DCF coordinates the program through a single point of contact and also as the state itself delivers some of the crucial services. This centrality is vital to ensuring cost-effective coordination of services throughout the state.

It is important to note that the Wilson Fish program has only functioned in states with a much smaller client population and a much smaller programming scale than Florida's current program. Texas is the first large program in which Wilson Fish is being implemented. Based on its size, Texas has been divided into four regions, each with a lead coordinating agency responsible to the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

Applying the Wilson Fish Program to a resettlement program the size of Texas' is an unprecedented use of the Wilson Fish model. The current Florida resettlement program has even two to three times more clients than Texas. It remains to be seen how well Texas' new model will function.

Key Concern: Changes in Federal Policies for Cubans and Other Refugees

Federal resettlement policies will have a tremendous impact on Florida's program. On January 12, the Obama Administration announced the end of the "wetfoot/dryfoot" policy, through which so many participants in Florida's resettlement program have come. We applaud your expression of concern for this abrupt change and your request for reversal of the policy. Even if it is unchanged, lower but still significant numbers of Cubans will continue to arrive in Florida (seeking asylum and through other mechanisms). Other individuals may continue to migrate to Florida from other states.

During his campaign, President Trump made comments that suggest U.S. policies toward refugees could also change. This could also yield decreases in the numbers of RRP refugees resettled here.

Such future decreases in the number of Cubans and refugees would mean that the economies of scale achieved by state coordination of the program would not be as crucial an issue after the service period ends for refugees, Cubans and others who are already in the program as of the announcement earlier this month. However, their eligibility period for some limited services will remain for several years, even though many achieve self-sufficiency very rapidly and frequently do not require assistance beyond their initial year. Meanwhile, particularly until this potential transition period is over, even a Florida program with progressively many fewer participants could still be a much larger program than ever implemented through the Wilson Fish program.

Conclusion: Strong recommendation to continue DCF coordination of refugee resettlement

Perhaps some aspects of federal policy will be settled before the end of the legislative session, and their impacts on Florida can be considered with respect to the future of this important program. It does, however, seem that to add restructuring of the coordination role of this important program at a time of such policy upheaval would be imprudent as well as unnecessary. It could add a layer of complexity that will only exacerbate the strain to providers with a potentially negative impact on refugees, Cubans and other new arrivals, and also on the communities welcoming them.

Keeping the refugee resettlement program while publicly supporting it, implementing reforms or improving upon it will frame Florida as a model of a welcoming state for some of the most vulnerable people on our planet. My brother bishops and I are proud of the role Catholic agencies have in assisting in resettlement in Florida. As Leviticus 19:34 reminds us:

"Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God."

We stand ready to collaborate to ensure the effectiveness of this vital work going forward.

Sincerely,



Most Rev. Thomas G. Wenski
President &
Archbishop of Miami

cc: Most Rev. Frank J. Dewane, Bishop of Venice & FCCB Moderator for Social Concerns
Bishops of Florida
William Canny, Executive Director, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Migration and Refugee Services
Michael Sheedy, Executive Director, FCCB

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



January 25, 2017

The Honorable Richard Corcoran, Speaker
Florida House of Representatives
420 The Capitol
402 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1300

Re: Recommendation to Continue Current State Refugee Resettlement Coordination

Dear Mr. Speaker:

As you engage in the legislative process and the House crafts a budget, you will be reviewing the work of the Department of Children and Families' Refugee Resettlement Program. Discontinuing state coordination of the program is also the topic of HB 427 by Representative Santiago. Reflecting on the experience of Catholic agencies who have varying roles assisting eligible participants in Florida and beyond, I am pleased to outline the reasons for our strong support for the current coordination model.

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