

FLORIDA CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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MICHAEL B. SHEEDY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



November 15, 2019

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor
400 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

Re: Urging consent to continue resettlement of refugees in Florida

Dear Governor DeSantis:

On September 26, 2019, President Trump announced that his Administration would resettle 18,000 refugees in the United States in the coming year. He also issued Executive Order 13888 guiding where that resettlement would take place. The Executive Order directed the U.S. Secretary of State and the Secretary of Health and Human Services to create a process by which states and localities would consent to the resettlement of refugees in their locales. We urge you to consent to continue resettlement of refugees in Florida. Local governments would maintain the discretion to opt in or out of resettlement in their localities.

Florida's Contributions to Resettlement of Refugees

Florida's refugee program has been a national leader. According to the 2016 Annual Report to Congress of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), 4% of refugee arrivals that year were resettled in Florida*. However, Cuban and Haitian Entrants have also been eligible for ORR benefits and services. When the number of Cuban and Haitian entrants was taken into consideration, Florida served a much higher number**. Policy decisions in recent years, such as the discontinuation "Wet Foot/Dry Foot" and the progressive drops in refugee admissions nationally, will prompt a lower number of refugees that will be resettled in Florida.

Proud History of Catholic Resettlement Efforts in Florida

Catholic Charities of Florida is honored that our agencies are the longest-serving providers of refugee services in Florida. Even before the establishment of the U.S. Refugee Program in 1980, Catholic Charities agencies in Florida sponsored unaccompanied minors from Cuba through Operation Pedro Pan in the 1960s; resettled refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in the 1970s; and continued resettling refugees when the U.S. Refugee Program began in 1980.

Christians from the Middle East have found haven in Florida from religious persecution. Additionally, Florida, through Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Miami, is one of 14 states (plus DC) operating an Unaccompanied Refugee Minors program.

To discontinue this ministry would reverse our long history of welcoming the stranger among us, serving the critical needs of this vulnerable population, fighting against human trafficking, and reunifying families who have faced persecution.

Refugees: Unique Population Worthy of Special Consideration

The specific population of refugees is particularly deserving of our protection. These individuals have demonstrated to U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services that they are fleeing persecution, some of them as a result of working with the U.S. military and government. Refugees have also passed robust and thorough screening processes by agencies including the National Counterterrorism Center, FBI, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Defense, and Department of State. With the temporary support of resettlement agencies and many of our Church volunteers, refugees quickly are contributing members of our communities who are employed and enrolled in school.

Join other States Committed to Resettlement

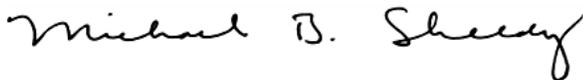
We urge Florida to join Utah, Massachusetts and Ohio among other states in granting consent for refugee resettlement. While the administration's determination reduces the numbers of refugees to be resettled, it certainly does not preclude resettlement. Florida ought not preclude resettlement at a statewide level either.

The FY 2020 Notice of Funding Opportunity for Reception and Placement Program, published on November 6, requires resettlement agencies to provide your written consent and local governments' written consent before the future resettlement of refugees. Out of humanitarian motivation to assure that these important refugee protections continue in Florida, the FCCB is urging this consent. Deadlines for the submission of proposals is January 21, 2020, and we look forward to including your consent with Catholic Charities' submission.

Your consent to resettling refugees in Florida would give local governments the option to opt in to the program – particularly those that already have the partnerships with local service providers and employers due to existing resettlement programs – and allow other communities to opt out.

The Catholic Church in Florida deeply desires to serve the poor and vulnerable in their communities and to assist refugees in becoming contributing members to the common good of those communities. We urge your consent to continue to do so.

Sincerely,



Michael B. Sheedy

cc: Most Rev. Thomas G. Wenski, Archbishop of Miami and FCCB President
Most Rev. Frank J. Dewane, Bishop of Venice & FCCB Justice & Peace Moderator

* U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement (2016). Annual Report to Congress. Retrieved from: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/arc_16_508.pdf

** U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement (2016). FY 2015 Served Populations by State and Country of Origin. Retrieved from: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/fy-2015-served-populations-by-state-and-country-of-origin-refugees-only>.