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**Testimony by Rabbi Moti Rieber, Executive Director of Kansas Interfaith Action,
in partial opposition to HB 2612, “The Refugee Absorptive Capacity Act”**

Madame Chair, members of the committee -

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this morning. My name is Rabbi Moti Rieber, and I am Executive Director of Kansas Interfaith Action, a statewide, multi-faith organization that “puts faith into action” by educating, engaging and advocating on behalf of people of faith and the public regarding critical social, economic, and environmental justice issues. I am here today in opposition, in part, to HB 2612.

Refugee resettlement has been a hot topic for the past few months, and that has given the religious community a chance to weigh in. I'd like to share with you a few representative statements.

These statements start from and cite the scriptural verses that pertain to the issue, including the repeated admonition that we “not oppress a foreigner; for you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt” (Exo. 23:9) and Jesus' lesson that “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt. 25:35b).

Denominations across the religious spectrum have used these texts as the basis for calling on the United States to be more supportive and welcoming to refugees from the Syrian civil war. I will cite only a small number of examples.

A statement by the Jewish Committee on Public Affairs, the main community relations arm of the national, organized Jewish community, in its “Resolution on Refugee Crisis”¹ points to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol (the Refugee Convention), which 148 countries, including the United States, have signed. This prohibits returning a refugee to his or her country of persecution; requires access to fair and humane asylum procedures for all asylum seekers; and states that countries will not penalize refugees for illegal entry or presence. The JCPA statement continues:

With the largest and most sophisticated resettlement program in the world, the US can and should increase the number of refugees it resettles from Syria and enhance efficiency of the resettlement program. This leadership will encourage other countries to step up their efforts as well.

A statement by the Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church has a title which is declarative: “Welcoming the Stranger: Difficult and Necessary.”² The statement points out the breadth of the crisis: nearly 745,000 Syrians have applied for asylum in Europe, and almost 549,000 have arrived there.

In contrast, the United States has said that it will accommodate 70,000 carefully screened refugees for 2015. Yet since the war in Syria began in 2011, only 1,500 identifiable Syrians have been admitted to the US as refugees. The White House announced in September that it was beginning preparations to take in an additional 10,000 Syrian refugees over the next year. This led to a reaction amongst governors in the country, including Gov. Brownback, restricting

refugee resettlement, and also I infer, to this proposed legislation.

Continuing the UMC Statement:

Global Ministries welcomes these announced increases, but finds them inadequate. We agree with human rights and relief agencies that the US Congress should allow 100,000 refugees from the Syrian-Iraqi conflict to enter the country.

A similar statement, signed by a number of denominations including the Presbyterian Church USA, the Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ, and the Friends National Committee on Legislation, calls on the United States to “open its doors to receive many more refugees.”³

In light of this background, I would like to make the following statements:

- The people in question are refugees from a brutal civil war, which has left hundreds of thousands of dead and hundreds of thousands more displaced. They are neither economic migrants nor enemy combatants. Their homes and their way of life has been completely destroyed. I believe a healthy dose of compassion is called for.
- Second, the United States has an obligation under treaty and international law to assist in the support and resettlement of refugees. Based on the fact that it was the actions of the United States, including the Iraq war and the failure stop the violence in Syrian, that has led to the current refugee crisis.
- The concern for governmental resources upon which this legislation relies could be addressed by the legislature. If our budget crisis were to be adequately addressed, refugee resettlement would not be the only aspect of life that would be improved. But it's my understanding that most of the funding for refugee resettlement comes from the federal government anyway, including placement, cultural orientation, interim cash and medical assistance, employment services, ESL, etc.
- A “determination” that a community lacks sufficient absorptive capacity to settle refugees is a subjective standard that could be, and I expect would be, based on the prejudices and political positions of the people making the determination. Refugee resettlement is too vital an issue to be left to such factors.
- I am also concerned by what I believe are anti-Muslim tropes in this legislation. For instance, refugees are more likely to be fleeing female genital mutilation forced on them by Isis than to be bringing it here as a cultural artifact. Its inclusion in this bill is part of climate of fear and prejudice that I would hope is beneath us as a people.

In conclusion, Kansas Interfaith Action is neutral on the part of this legislation that establishes the office of refugee resettlement and gathers statistics on the issue. We oppose those pieces that allow the declaration of a moratorium on refugee resettlement, because we believe it is based on a combination of self-inflicted budget issues and an aversion to resettling Muslim refugees.

Scripture does not make an exception based on the origin of the stranger, and neither should we. I encourage this committee to delete the offensive sections of the bill so that the angels of our better nature, and not our fears, can prevail.

I thank you for your attention.

¹ Read more at <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/what-bible-says-about-how-treat-refugees#ozuAzpHsE0JBOGDK.99>

²<http://www.umcmission.org/learn-about-us/news-and-stories/2015/september/0911welcomingthestranger>

³<http://officeofpublicwitness.blogspot.com/2015/09/the-pcusa-signs-on-to-faith-letter-on.html>