



February 15, 2016

My name is Ken Williams. I am the President and CEO of Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony concerning House Bill No. 2612, also referred to as the Refugee Absorptive Capacity Act.

Imagine being forced to flee your country for fear of being tormented or even killed because of who you are and what you believe. You are forced to leave the place you call home, the family and friends that you love, your job and familiar surroundings. Everything in life that you have ever known is left behind. This is the story of the nearly 400 refugees resettled by Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas (CCNEK) each year.

CCNEK has more than 40 years of experience serving the needs of new Americans in our region, having resettled refugees in the community since 1975. CCNEK is the largest of five resettlement agencies in the state of Kansas, and is the only resettlement agency in Wyandotte and Johnson counties. It is a “U.S. tie site”, meaning refugees are united with family members or friends who are already settled in the area and can provide some assistance. The vast majorities of the refugees resettled by CCNEK are from the Southeast Asian nation of Burma and include the ethnic groups Chin, Karen, Karenni, and Bhutanese. Although infrequent, CCNEK occasionally receives and resettles refugees from Somalia, Congo, Eritrea, Iraq and Iran.

CCNEK’s refugee resettlement services are performed under a subcontract to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), which contacts directly with the Department of State. Neither USCCB nor CCNEK play any role whatsoever in the screening or selection of refugees to be accepted into the United States. It’s only after an individual refugee or refugee family has cleared the federal government’s screening process and formally been accepted into the United States Refugee Program that CCNEK is notified of their pending arrival.

The goal of refugee resettlement is to educate and empower refugees to become self-sufficient thereby enhancing their quality of life. Education background varies, and while many have literacy in their native language, English numerical/written literacy is often low. Their socio-economic status is precarious; many arrive with little more than the clothing on their backs.

While refugees are grateful to be on the path to citizenship in the United States, the process of integration and transition to life in their new homeland is difficult. Catholic Charities partners with state agencies and other nonprofit organizations to meet the unique needs of each refugee through Cultural Orientation, English Classes, Job Training and Employment Development, and Strengths-Based Case Management.

Although integration and transition is difficult, many of our refugees are able to contribute to the community in fairly short order. Two hundred forty six refugees found full time, part time, or seasonal work during the past year. Their employment translated into nearly \$5 million in gross wages to these refugees, all of which pay federal, state and local taxes.

Sixty seven refugee families from Burma and Bhutan purchased homes in Wyandotte County in 2015. The average purchase price was \$111,000 contributing approximately \$7.3 million dollars to the local economy.

Twenty five refugee farmers participating in Catholic Charities “New Roots For Refugees Program” grew fresh, organic vegetables that were sold through local community markets contributing an additional \$178,000 to the economy. In addition refugee farmers participate in the Beans and Greens program which doubles food stamps for fresh vegetables at the Kansas City Kansas Greenmarkets making fresh produce more affordable and accessible for low income families.

Refugees regularly pursue higher education at Donnelly College, Kansas City Kansas Community College and Johnson County Community College. Refugees are members of many of our community churches including First Baptist of KCK, Saints Cyrus and Methodius, St. Patricks Catholic Church and Oak Grove Assembly Church. In 2015, there were more than 20 refugee congregations meeting in Wyandotte County.

Refugees often show their gratitude and appreciation for their new safe home here in the United States by volunteering themselves. Groups of refugees volunteer each Friday afternoon at different community agencies including Harvesters Food Bank, Habitat ReStore, BoysGrow, and Adelante Thrift.

The greater Kansas City community continues to participate in the resettlement of refugees by contributing more than 7,000 volunteer hours and contributing more than \$60,000 in household items such as furniture, beds, and houseware items in 2015 alone.

With respect to HB 2612:

Given that Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas is a “U.S. tie site”, and the vast majority of refugees we receive are from Burma, most of the refugees are resettled in Wyandotte County. Consequently, we work and speak regularly with our State Refugee Coordinator, staff at the Department of Children and Family (DCF), local healthcare facilities, representatives from the KCK School District, child welfare agencies, KCK police department, churches, employers and neighborhood representatives concerning absorptive capacity issues. CCNEK agrees that absorption capacity of a city or community should be and is an important consideration for any

refugee resettlement program. We continue to make every effort to encourage and persuade refugees to settle and establish “new communities” in cities other than Kansas City Kansas. The operative words are persuade and encourage. Upon arrival, all refugees are legal residents of the United States of America, and are therefore are able to live anywhere they choose. It’s not uncommon for refugees who have been resettled in one state to move to another state within a few days of arrival so that they can live near or with family or friends. They are called secondary migrants.

So while CCNEK agrees the absorptive capacity of communities is a necessary and important consideration, we are concerned with some of the implementation ideas presented in HB 2612. Specifically, the idea of establishing moratoriums on new refugee resettlement activities in certain cities or communities is impractical in our opinion.

First, keep in mind the refugees were accepted into the United States and subsequently sent to Kansas because they have close family or friend ties here in our community. As stated earlier, these refugees have left everything they know and own when they leave their home countries, and even though they are fleeing to safety, it is nonetheless a very traumatic experience. Living with or in very close proximity to family ties is an essential part of the refugee resettlement plan.

Second, these refugees are legal residents of the United States and are therefore allowed to live where ever they choose. Preventing refugees from living in a certain community or forcing them to live in a certain city or community would be robbing them of one of our basic freedoms in the United States.

Rather than moratoriums, one alternative might be to offer housing incentives to entice refugee families to resettle in other communities. The availability of important services such as public transportation has also been a hindrance when CCNEK has tried to resettle refugees outside of KCK.

Many aspects of HB 2612 are already implemented. For example, our Refugee Resettlement Leaders currently conduct regularly scheduled community stakeholder meetings which include representatives from the school district and schools, healthcare facilities, police department, churches, employers and landlords. CCNEK Refugee Resettlement leaders also meet regularly with the existing designated State Coordinator for Refugee Resettlement (DCF employee) to discuss the program and address any issues. In addition, our State Coordinator and DCF staff currently require CCNEK to provide substantial data and reporting on refugee families served by our staff. We will work diligently with our DCF colleagues to provide any additional data required.

Finally, we are deeply concerned by the Executive Order contemplated in this bill that would in essence eliminate state employees and agencies from participating in the resettlement of refugees altogether. We value the contributions made by our colleagues at DCF and believe it is vitally important for the state to continue its participation in the resettlement process. We are also concerned that such an Executive Order would prompt the Department of State to implement a Wilson Fish program here in Kansas. Wilson Fish is an alternative to traditional state administered refugee resettlement programs for providing assistance (cash and medical) and social services to

refugees. CCNEK believes a refugee resettlement program operating under Wilson Fish would diminish visibility and control of the refugee program in our state. We respectfully suggest this would not be in the best interest of the citizens of our great state of Kansas.

Although Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas agrees that Absorption Capacity is and should be a very important consideration for any Refugee Resettlement Program, due to practical implementation concerns, we respectfully opposes House Bill No. 2612.

On behalf of the entire staff of Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas, especially those who work in our Refugee Resettlement Program, I thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on House Bill No. 2612.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ken Williams", followed by a small dash.

Ken Williams
President / CEO
Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas