



## Health and Human Services- Texas Senate Testimony

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Chairman Schwertner, Vice Chair Kolkhorst, and members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to share the truth about refugees with you today. My name is Heather Reynolds, and I represent the Diocese of Fort Worth and have the privilege of serving as the CEO of Catholic Charities, Diocese of Fort Worth.

Catholic Charities Fort Worth (CCFW) is a 27M enterprising nonprofit with diverse services, poverty solutions, and income-generating social enterprises that help tens of thousands in our 28 county diocese each year, most of whom are the working poor, some of whom are even Catholic. We challenge the way poverty is addressed through research partnerships, exporting solutions, and serving as a resource for policymakers. We truly believe we can find a way to eradicate poverty.

And that starts with the faces of the refugees we meet every day. Like Gabriel, one of the Lost Boys of Sudan, who fled his home as a 12 year old boy, trekking to Africa and losing everything and every person he knew along the way- all on account of freedom. He's now one of the hardest working team members I know in our refugee services department. Or Samuel, a refugee I met serendipitously a few weeks ago, my cab driver when I was in Nevada. In near perfect English, he recounted how good this country was to him to allow him to start over after the horror of war in Ethiopia. He was resettled in Atlanta, saved up for a year and moved to Nevada to be near other Ethiopians. Now every year at Christmas, he and others return to Atlanta, bringing all the money they have saved, and give it to the nonprofit there that gave him this American chance.

If you are unfamiliar with the term refugee, or have never met one of the 780,000 resettled here in the US, I want to make it clear. These are folks who have fled their homelands and cannot return because of persecution for a multitude of discriminatory reasons. They are not seeking entry into the U.S. to look for work opportunities, to reunite with family, or to hide from the law. They are victims, literally fleeing for their lives.



As recent events have unfolded across Europe, many fear the possibility of terrorists posing as refugees entering the United States. But refugees are the most scrutinized of any immigrant group entering the U.S. Refugee status starts with The United Nations High Commission, who refers the refugee to the US Department of state, who then contracts with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, one of nine voluntary organizations, who then contracts with our office to resettle the refugee. Before they are allowed to come to the United States, they must pass through 13 rigorous steps. On average, the refugee screening process takes 18-24 months. But we have many clients who have spent anywhere between 17 to 22 years living in camps, awaiting the screening process. Less than one-half of 1% of all refugees worldwide are ever resettled to a country like the U.S., and they are unable to choose their destination country. If a terrorist wanted to enter the U.S., posing as a refugee would promise a nearly-impossible chance of success, not to mention one of the most inefficient options.

Funding for the majority of refugee resettlement programs stems from the federal budget. Every year, Congress allocates specific dollars designated to fund refugee programs. It reaches the state in one of two ways: through our national resettlement agency, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, or through the Department of Health and Human Services, which grants money to the Office of Immigration and Refugee Affairs. When we accept a refugee, we work side by side with the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) and Department of Public Safety (DPS) through multiple check in's on a monthly and by request basis.

Last year, CCFW resettled 609 refugees. Of the 12 other Catholic Charities agencies in Texas, there are 7 currently serving refugees, all with varying capacities that are limited in part by their local communities' capacity. We in Fort Worth are proud to say that 96% of our Refugee Match Grant clients reached self-sufficiency within 6 months. That means free of any social service, including state assistance. I know refugees and former refugees in Fort Worth who own and operate small businesses, work in our hospitality and retail industries, help others through social service agencies like Catholic Charities, serve as community interpreters, and



hold public office. It also means that these individuals are learning a new language, assimilating into our communities, and engaging in the workforce, all within six months.

We place a strong emphasis on employment for all adults who are not too ill or elderly to work. And boy do they ever. We'd be so lucky to have the same success rates with our domestic clients.

I understand you have a job, a duty to ensure the safety of Texans, and we of all people appreciate that. I also know that we have a moral obligation to welcome the stranger as Christ called us to. I don't believe that maintaining the American and Christian values of hospitality and safety or prudence are mutually exclusive. My request of you today is to balance those responsibilities carefully, and not to lead our state with fear. And if you don't know a refugee personally, I would suggest that before you make any decisions on refugees in Texas, you take time out of your schedules to have a cup of coffee with one. I am more than happy to make that happen if you just ask.

Thank you.