



July 11, 2017

CWS Declaration

Church World Service (CWS), a humanitarian agency that brings together 37 Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox member communions. The CWS constituency represents more than 30 million people in the United States who affirm the importance of refugee resettlement as a private-public partnership that has broad support from communities across the country.

I, Erol Kekic, am the executive director of the CWS Immigration and Refugee Program (IRP). I have worked in the field of refugee protection and resettlement for more than 21 years, leading CWS's work in humanitarian protection and development of durable solutions that bridge the gap between disaster relief and development. Before serving as the associate director and then executive director of CWS IRP, I served as the associate director for the Lutheran Family and Community Service Immigration and Refugee Program and assistant director for resettlement for the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, both in New York. I have a Bachelor of Science degree in chemical engineering at the University of Sarajevo and have done graduate work at The University of Detroit-Mercy in Michigan and at Oxford University Refugee Study Centre in the UK.

The United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) works with nine agencies to resettle refugees into communities across the country; one of these agencies is CWS, which agreed to serve **8,687** individuals in FY 2017. Of this number, CWS has already resettled **6,664** refugees and has an additional **3,626** individuals in its assured-not-yet-arrived overseas pipeline (some of whom may arrive next year); all of whom have been waiting for years to flee from harm and the chance to live in safety.

U.S. Ties Who Are Not “Bona fide relationships” Under the Administration’s Interpretation

Of the 3,626 currently in the CWS pipeline who have been assured and have a U.S. tie, 1,072 individuals do not have what the Administration considers to be a “bona fide relationship”. In its interpretation of the Supreme Court’s decision on this case, the Administration is asserting that refugees who have expected to join their grandmothers, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews and friends do not have a “bona fide relationship” with an individual in the United States.

Among the group of individuals being impacted by the Administration’s interpretation of a bona fide relationship is a 93 year old grandmother resettled to the US, who three years ago filed family reunification applications for her daughter and granddaughter from Ukraine, both of whom are booked to arrive in the United States in two weeks’ time. Unfortunately, neither the mother nor the daughter, who are both, importantly, religious minorities, a group that the State Department has prioritized for resettlement, will be allowed to depart for the U.S. Their cases are “hard-cross-referenced”, which means one cannot travel without the other, and as the granddaughter does not have what is considered to be a “bona fide relationship” to her U.S. tie (i.e.: her grandmother), the mother – who has a bona fide relationship –will also be prevented

from travel. As a result, this 93 year old grandmother may never be reunited with her daughter or granddaughter.

“Cross-Referenced” Family Members

Resettlement Support Centers (RSCs), which prescreen refugees referred to the US program regularly process refugees as “cross-referenced” cases if a refugee identifies a need to travel and/or live in the same location with a family member or friend. These decisions are often vulnerability or dependency based. Guidance from the federal government to RSCs on cross-referencing specifies that “a cross-reference is a link between cases for the purpose of travel and resettlement. Cross-referenced cases are those that have an established association with each other¹.”

If they need to be processed together (travel and live together), the RSC will hard-cross-reference (HCR) them to ensure they go through each step in the process together. If they want to resettle together, but one case has more urgent needs, the RSC will normally soft-cross-reference (SCR) their cases. Soft-cross referencing ensures that they will eventually be reunited in the same location in the U.S.

Implementation of this recognizes that many refugee families are not commonly that of a nuclear family, but that grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles frequently play a role in raising children and that familial relationships do not end at the “bona fide” level as currently defined by the Administration. CWS has hundreds of individuals who may not have a “bona fide” relationship to a U.S. tie as currently defined by the Administration, but whose cases are cross-referenced to cases of family or friends who have already arrived in the U.S.

Refugees “Without US ties”

CWS also has **1,384** refugees in its assured-not-yet-arrived pipeline who do not have a U.S. tie, but who have no option to return home or be integrated into their host country. Among these individuals is a displaced Somali family of ten. Their children have been diagnosed as malnourished and continue to live in unsafe conditions. One of them was, in fact, attacked on his way to his interview with the resettlement support staff and suffered severe head trauma. Their mother suffers from strokes that have left half her body paralyzed. After having spent the past 19 years in a desolate refugee camp along the border of Kenya and Somalia, they finally were meant to arrive in the U.S. this week but their travel has been cancelled. “If these and other refugees are denied entry, families like this – who face an existential threat every day – will be in limbo indefinitely. Their medical exams and security checks will expire, they will not receive adequate treatment for their serious medical conditions; their children will remain malnourished and unable to attend school, and their future uncertain. Despite being told that they were approved for admission to the U.S., the promise of resettling safely in the U.S. will now be revoked, for no fault of their own.

¹ RSC SOP 2: Pre-screening. This SOP describes minimum standards set forth by PRM and RPC, and guides local implementation by RSCs within their regional coverage.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Erol Kekić". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent flourish at the end.

Erol Kekić
Executive Director, Immigration and Refugee Programs
Church World Service