

Chair Keny-Guyer, Members of the Committee:

Sabai-dee. Thank you...for opening up space in your schedule and in your hearts. My name is Toc Soneoulay-Gillespie, and I'm a refugee from Laos. I resettled to the U.S. with my mother and father at the age of 4. And now, I am humbly speaking in front of you, our elected officials and Legislators. Who would've ever thought that I would've made it this far?

Working with vulnerable populations is my life's calling. In a way, I started this work when I was a young child being pulled into the role of an interpreter for the Lao community, helping them navigate the many complex systems. This had a profound and lasting effect on me. I didn't truly understand the systems until I began working inside them – everything from seniors and adults with disabilities, youth and family services, anti-poverty, gang prevention, education, healthcare, and refugee resettlement.

As the former Director of Refugee Resettlement at Catholic Charities, I was at the front lines when all the resettlement agencies in the country were impacted by the change in the administration, and the federal policies started closing the doors to refugees. Oregon went from welcoming nearly 2,000 individuals to hopefully welcoming 500 individuals this year. This means that there are thousands of refugees within the pipeline that are no longer considered for resettlement, leaving families indefinitely separated, and Oregon's history of resettling refugees in danger of ending for the foreseeable future.

As a Commissioner on the Oregon Commission on Asian Pacific Islander Affairs, in combination with my lived experience as a refugee, and my professional work experience, I have unique insight on how the State of Oregon can ensure access to the supports needed by refugees arriving today, so they don't fall through the cracks.

I can only imagine what extended case management would've done for my parents, Phouvong and Soulideth who proudly cleaned toilets in order to provide for our family. Not to mention, the thousands of other refugees who also fell through the cracks, that we don't want to create here in Oregon. Unfortunately, these are the people who did not have the opportunity to learn English, have access to better employment options, nor a skilled case manager to help them navigate the system. We can and we must do better for the families arriving now to Oregon.

What does it look like for our State to step forward and be a national leader in how refugees are welcomed and integrated in our state? The Bill before you will help our newest community members achieve the outcomes mentioned by Kelsey and Salah. Research from the state resettlement in Utah found, "substantial improvements and reduction in needs in all categories...adjustment, health, employment, finances, education, housing, and total well-being." With stable funding for the resettlement agencies, in partnership with the multitude of other refugee serving agencies before you I strongly encourage you to support the extended case management model proposed in House Bill 2508, as this legislation will ensure our newest community members thrive.

Thank you,  
Toc Soneoulay-Gillespie