

Chair Wagner and members of the Senate Committee on Education,

My name is Matthew Westerbeck. I am the Director of Community and Legislative Engagement with Oregon's Refugee Resettlement Collaborative. We are a coalition of Oregon's refugee resettlement agencies, Unite Oregon, and IRCO - the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization.

We are proud to support Senate Bill 263, and we encourage you to do the same.

To begin, I want to make sure we all understand who we are talking about when we say the words refugees and Special Immigrant Visa holders. *Who* – not what – are refugees and SIVs. They are people with incredible strength, and they are survivors. They are the families and individuals we are honored and humbled to work with. Every day we see their incredible resilience and dedication to rebuild their lives and become contributing members of our communities. Before arriving to the United States, refugees and SIV's have been forced to flee their homes for reasons of war, genocidal violence, religious persecution, and political oppression. It's important to note that SIV's are the interpreters that worked with our armed forces and government in Iraq and Afghanistan. For their service to our country they and their families are often targeted by forces within their own countries. Many have been killed for their service to our country.

Most refugees have waited over a decade – some have waited more than 20 years – before they are welcomed to our country. All of them have gone through extensive screening and vetting procedures. No other type of visa or immigrant has to pass as high a bar to enter our country as refugees and SIV's. They are all interviewed, screened and vetted by numerous federal agencies, including: FBI, USCIS, Dept. of Homeland Security, and Dept. of State. All refugees and SIV's are documented immigrants; all are on a pathway to citizenship; and they all have the same rights and responsibilities as you and I, save for sitting on a jury and the right to vote.

Equally important, these families are our newest neighbors. Oregon has been resettling refugees since the 1940's, after the end of WWII. In the years since, refugees have contributed to our state in numerous, invaluable ways. In addition to sharing with us their cultures, their incredible food, customs, and their strength of spirit, numerous studies show that refugees are positive contributors to our economy. Refugees are more likely to be entrepreneurs than U.S.-born populations (13% compared to 9%). Refugees have a higher rate of labor force participation and employment rates. Perhaps most impressive is that the average refugee household, 25 years after arriving to the U.S. with only the clothes they can carry on a plane, has an income that is \$14,000 more than U.S. households overall. Refugees are also successful in obtaining higher education. In fact, there is little difference in rates of graduation from college for refugees that arrive before the age of 13.

Senate Bill 263 will support refugees and SIV's as they work towards these achievements that strengthen both their families and our communities. By removing a barrier to access to higher education for those that are able to attend college or university within their first year of arrival to Oregon, this bill recognizes and supports the incredible value refugees bring to our state. We encourage you to vote yes on this bill and ensure that our newest neighbors are not discouraged from pursuing their dreams – dreams that many have waited decades to pursue.

Thank you.

Matthew Westerbeck