



TO: Appropriations Committee
FROM: Tom Venzor, Executive Director
Nebraska Catholic Conference
DATE: Feb. 15, 2022
RE: LB968 (ARPA Housing and Employment Funding for Refugees) (Support)

The Nebraska Catholic Conference advocates for the public policy interests of the Catholic Church and advances the Gospel of Life through engaging, educating, and empowering public officials, Catholic laity, and the general public.

The Catholic Church's social teaching has a long established care and concern for the refugee. Throughout the Old Testament we repeatedly witness the Jewish people being exiled from the Promised Land. While this forced migration was an immoral act and an undesirable situation, the Jewish people came to a deeper understanding of God's love through their suffering. This experience helped them develop a deeper sympathy and support for those who came to Israel as immigrants from distant lands. When you look at the life of Jesus Christ, as an infant, He became a refugee. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph fled to Egypt and escaped the intended murder of Jesus by King Herod. In Christ's challenging words in Matthew 25, Jesus charged us to "welcome the stranger."

In this spirit of Christian charity, Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska—the charitable outreach arm of the Diocese of Lincoln, which covers the state of Nebraska south of the Platte River—has long been serving the refugee community arriving in Nebraska. While the federal government's U.S. Refugee Admissions Program did not formally begin until 1980, CSS has helping resettle refugees since 1940, assisting people displaced by World War II. Since then, over the last 80 years, CSS has assisted Czechs, Hungarians, Jews, Latvians, Poles, Ukrainians, Cubans, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Ethiopians, Laotians, Syrians, Sudanese, among others—in short, we've served refugees from across the world.

Since September 2021, CSS has welcomed and resettled around 150 Afghan parolees and Special Immigrant Visa holders (SIVs) through the Afghan Placement Assistance Program. While the numbers are not yet established, there will be another wave of Afghan refugees anticipated in the next several months. This is in addition to the standard refugee work CSS undertakes. Last year, they assisted around 50 refugees and this year they anticipate assisting another 80 refugees.

When refugees come to Nebraska they bring with them a unique set of circumstances and needs. Needs that we—as individual Nebraskans and collectively as a state and country—owe a responsibility toward.

In the area of housing, finding accessible, affordable, and safe housing for refugees is a real challenge. As refugees are beginning to see more placements in rural communities in our state,

they face the same housing access challenges that this Committee is well aware of. This is in addition to accessibility issues in our urban communities. Due to the current housing crisis, CSS spent around \$50,000 on short-term stay hotels until safe and affordable housing could be secured, funds and staff time that could have been better spent on core services and longer term investments to serve our communities.

As well, access to housing is often difficult because refugees come with no prior rental history, no credit, and no employment. When housing is obtained it is too often found in unsafe neighborhoods and in buildings which too often fail to keep up with safety and sanitary standards. For example, securing units with three bedrooms or more is extremely difficult, but CSS was recently able to obtain two reasonably priced units next to each other for two Syrian families. A couple weeks after their arrival, a shooting occurred just outside their front doors. Needless to say, to be removed from a war-torn county to end up in a neighborhood where you are woken by gunfire is far from ideal.

Given these challenges, LB968 would go a long way in investing in our refugee community, as they make their start in the United States. The grant money allocated by LB968 could generate creative solutions to the housing and employment issues refugees face. For example, it could be used to develop or purchase and renovate a 6- or 10-plex facility where refugee families could temporarily stay as they establish credit and a rental history while securing employment.

As this Appropriations Committee continues with the challenging task of listening to and identifying key priorities for ARPA spending, we encourage you to maintain a keen awareness for those communities who have been most impacted by the pandemic, particularly those in poverty and other communities, such as refugees who adapting to the American way of life during a global pandemic.

We thank Sen. Dorn for introducing LB968 and urge the Committee to adopt it into your final ARPA spending plan.

Thank you for your time and consideration.