May 2, 2022

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden,

On behalf of Refugee Council USA (RCUSA), a diverse coalition of 29 organizations that work to support refugee inclusion and resettlement excellence, I write to urge you to set the Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for FY 2023 at 200,000 before September 30th, to begin meaningful consultations with Congress on this matter—as required by U.S. law—in a timely manner, and to invest in necessary improvements to rebuild and strengthen the U.S. resettlement program to ensure that the U.S. resettlement system can meet today’s enormous humanitarian challenges.

RCUSA commends the steps your administration has taken to resettle Afghan refugees and is grateful for your administration’s commitment to share responsibility with the international community to welcome up to 100,000 Ukrainians through Uniting for Ukraine and the U.S. refugee admissions program. We look forward to working with your administration to resettle and welcome Ukrainian refugees and displaced third country nationals impacted by the hostilities, so they can live in safety and security until they decide if it is safe for them to return home. We note that your administration indicated in this same announcement plans to expand U.S. resettlement operations in Europe. As we follow through with our moral obligations to Afghans and Ukrainians seeking protection, it is equally imperative that your administration expand its investment in rebuilding and strengthening the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP).

Mounting global need demands bold leadership by the U.S. government in refugee protection and resettlement. The FY23 admissions goal must meaningfully respond to protracted, worsening, and emerging humanitarian crises. There are approximately 31 million refugees—the highest number in recorded history—and almost 1.5 million people are in urgent need of resettlement. As a key diplomatic and foreign policy tool, the United States should ground the U.S. resettlement program not only in global need, but also in equity and resource mobilization. Eritrean, Rohingya, Syrian and other refugees who have been waiting for years in the USRAP pipeline are equally deserving of a safe place to call home. The administration’s growing refugee backlog, particularly for family reunification, must be addressed swiftly. We urge your administration to work closely with Congress to secure robust funding for the refugee accounts to ensure that we are rebuilding the U.S. resettlement program sustainably.

We recognize that as of April 25, 2022, the USRAP has admitted 10,315 refugees, only 8% of theFY22 admissions goal of 125,000, in addition to the approximately 85,000 Afghan evacuees who had arrived since August 2021. Laying out our ambitious marker to set an admissions goal of 200,000 in FY23 must
be paired with implementing the key policy and programmatic reforms—above and beyond robust funding from Congress—to turn this vision into a reality and resettle as many refugees as possible next fiscal year. The administration should expedite family reunifications, expand overseas refugee adjudication capacity, improve refugee vetting efficiencies, strengthen domestic resettlement capacity, ensure due process and transparency, and appoint a senior-level White House coordinator to rebuild the USRAP. We further urge your administration to continue expanding partnerships and consultations with state and local governments, former refugees, and resettlement agencies and sites.

The U.S. resettlement program had sustained devastating cuts during the previous administration, with refugee resettlement in the United States falling to its lowest level since Congress created the modern system in 1980. The rebuilding of the program did not begin in earnest until we began resettling record numbers of Afghan evacuees. Now is not the time to retreat in rebuilding resettlement capacity; both overseas and domestic infrastructure must be maintained and expanded to serve higher refugee arrivals moving forward. We urge your administration to secure the resources and programmatic improvements needed to effectively do this work and meet this goal, and do it well—not just now, but for the long term. In an appendix to this letter, we offer a number of specific, practical recommendations that merit immediate attention and should be of use to a number of federal agencies.

A robust admissions goal of 200,000 for FY23 will send the world a strong, unambiguous message about America’s values and commitments. Together, we look to your administration’s bold leadership in rebuilding the resettlement program, as we remain committed to strengthening a community of partnership characterized by transparency and collaboration, consultation with civil society, coordination with state and local governments, and partnership with refugee leaders.

We look forward to working with you to continue to strengthen the global refugee protection regime and reaffirm the U.S. tradition of providing safe harbor for those in need.

Thank you for your leadership.

Sincerely,

John Slocum
Executive Director
Refugee Council USA

CC:
The Honorable Antony Blinken, Secretary of State
The Honorable Xavier Becerra, Secretary of Health and Human Services
The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas, Secretary of Homeland Security
Ron Klain, Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff
The Honorable Jake Sullivan, National Security Advisor
The Honorable Susan Rice, Director of the Domestic Policy Council
Appendix

Rebuilding the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP): Recommendations to Strengthen Refugee Resettlement in the United States

May 2022

The need for long-term protections for refugees has never been greater. The world is facing record displacement figures of more than 84 million people forced from their homes with enormous refugee overseas assistance needs. Of those, there are more than 31 million refugees, 12 million of whom are in need of resettlement, but fewer than 1% of refugees will ever be resettled to a third country. In 2021, most new refugees came from five countries: Central African Republic, South Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, and Nigeria. Further, the escalation of conflict in Ukraine has triggered an immediate and steep rise in humanitarian needs with millions of refugees who fled Ukraine since February 2022.

The U.S. resettlement program sustained devastating cuts and in 2021 refugee resettlement in the United States fell to its lowest level since Congress created the modern system in 1980. Today, resettlement agencies are beginning to rebuild the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) at a time when they are simultaneously continuing to resettle Afghan evacuees. The U.S. must both rebuild and strengthen the resettlement program and mobilize the public resources required to do so. It is critical that the Biden administration offers bold leadership to restore U.S. global leadership in refugee protection, as it promised in the February 2021 Executive Order. We offer the following recommendations to turn this vision into a reality:

1. **Expeditite Family Reunifications:** Refugee families face extreme backlogs in both the follow-to-join (FTJ, I-730) and Priority 3 (P-3) processes, and families continue to face protracted separation. Reforms to the refugee family reunification process should include immediately prioritizing staffing and resources to identify and remove bottlenecks to expedite existing FTJ and P-3 cases, removing the two-year filing deadline for FTJ petitions, and reducing lengthy delays in USCIS’s Refugee Access Verification Unit (RAVU) initial paper review of claimed relationships between the anchor relative and overseas family member listed on the Affidavit Of Relationship (AOR).

2. **Expand Overseas Refugee Adjudication Capacity:** To meet urgent protection needs and to resettle as many refugees as possible in FY 2022 and FY 2023, the administration must strengthen adjudication capacity to increase the number of refugees we can process to the United States. This should include hiring and training additional USCIS refugee officers, increasing the number and duration of circuit rides with trained staff, scheduling robust circuit rides as soon as possible for FY 2023, expanding Resettlement Support Center (RSC) capacity, (re)opening international offices, and expanding the USRAP pipeline to include additional NGO and DOS Embassy referrals. For example, the administration should expand all potential processing locations for refugees whose RSC is not operational due to emergencies or where processing has stopped, such as by creating pop-up RSCs.

3. **Improve Refugee Vetting Efficiencies:** Tens of thousands of refugees referred to the USRAP have languished in dangerous conditions for years, while they wait with little information about the status of their case. The administration should enable more efficient and equitable screening and adjudication processes, such as by expanding the use of video technology, reversing harmful and ineffective vetting practices, and establishing oversight mechanisms and high-level coordination of all aspects of USRAP. Particular attention should be paid to backlogs, such as applicants who had been previously interviewed.
before 2020, Afghan and Iraqi Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants, Iraqi and Afghan P-2 applicants, and family reunification cases, such as P-2 Iraqi and Syrian I-130 beneficiaries.

4. **Strengthen Domestic Resettlement Capacity**: Attention to domestic capacity is urgently needed to ensure that the administration can scale resettlement in FY22 and FY23. PRM and ORR should take steps to increase capacity across the network of resettlement agencies. Reforms could include providing additional funding for staffing, housing, and integration services for refugees and reforming the funding structure to ensure guaranteed funding for resettlement agencies at the beginning of the fiscal year. The administration should include creative capacity expansion, such as through new and existing **community sponsorship** programs.

5. **Ensure Due Process and Transparency**: Transparency and public reporting are critical to holding the administration accountable for operating USRAP in good faith and providing refugee applicants with more equitable treatment. The administration should reduce the opacity with which USRAP operates, such as by providing more regular case updates for applicants, continuing to publish reviews, reports, and policies relevant to refugee processing, and allowing access to counsel for key aspects of refugee processing. The administration should further ensure that it conducts timely and meaningful consultations with Congress around the FY 2023 refugee admissions goal in summer 2022 and sign the FY 2023 Presidential Determination before September 30th.

6. **Appoint Senior-Level White House Coordinator**: The White House should appoint a senior-level coordinator with a high level security clearance to coordinate federal agencies and other stakeholders around U.S. refugee resettlement and establish specific benchmarks to meet admissions goals. The President should establish an advisory body on refugee protection, led by the White House coordinator and composed of leaders and experts, including a significant number of refugees, former refugees, asylees, stateless people, and other vulnerable migrants. Continuing to rebuild this life-saving program will take time, resources, coordination, and leadership.

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*RCUSA is a diverse coalition advocating for just and humane laws and policies, and the promotion of dialogue and communication among government, civil society, and those who need protection and welcome. Individual RCUSA members do not all address all refugee-related issues, nor do all individual members approach common refugee-related issues identically.*