



## **LIRS suggested talking points – Syrian refugee crisis/Response to Paris tragedy**

### **Top Level Messages**

- We mourn with the people of France for the murder of innocents, and we are gravely concerned for the safety of the refugees who have fled and are fleeing the violence of ISIS every day.
- Syrian refugees are fleeing the same kind of terror which unfolded on the streets of Paris. They do not bring terror with them. Rather, they are fleeing it.
- This is not an either/or situation. The United States can continue to welcome refugees while continuing to ensure our own security. We must do both.
- The United States handpicks the refugees who resettle here, and they go through multiple layers of security checks, making them the most thoroughly vetted group of people who come to the United States. Security screenings are rigorous and involve the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, the Department of Defense and multiple intelligence agencies.
- States cannot unilaterally block resettlement. Governors do not have the legal authority to determine who lives in their states. Refugees are legally admitted to the United States and, therefore, have the right to move freely throughout the country. Suggesting otherwise is an attack on fundamental rights that we as Americans hold true and is against everything that we stand for.
- We urge public officials to avoid knee-jerk reactions that politicize the events in Paris, to reject misplaced blame that creates an atmosphere of fear, and to stand in solidarity with Syrian refugees, who are themselves the victims of ISIS.
- The United States resettles refugees of all faiths. Keeping some Syrian refugees out of this country based on their religion sends the wrong message to the rest of the world about who we are as Americans. We are a welcoming country with a religiously diverse society and our resettlement program should continue to reflect this. To not do so only feeds into ISIS' propaganda and makes us all less safe.

### **Background: Security Screening of Refugees**

- While the Paris attacks have made some Americans more fearful and ignited concerns around refugees in the US, from our daily work we know that the refugees who are admitted to the US seeking safety and protection from violence, war, persecution and other conditions in their homeland are not a risk to our safety. They come prepared to work hard, to give back to this country, and to ensure their children have a better future.
- Intensive security screening by the US government of all refugees prior to admission to the US is, and will continue to be, a detailed and rigorous process. The U.S. hand picks the refugees who are resettled here.
- Refugees are the most scrutinized and screened individuals to enter the United States. The robust and multi-layered series of security checks include biometrics, medical screenings, interagency intelligence sharing, and in-person interviews with Department of Homeland

Security and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officials are an extraordinary tool to ensure that the refugees we seek to protect will not pose a safety threat to the U.S.

- LIRS and its affiliates have already successfully resettled Syrian refugees in the US who are already making strides to be fully integrated into their local communities.
- Please click here for [State Department Resettlement Fact sheet](#); [Security Screening of Refugees Admitted to the United States by the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants](#); [Congressional testimony by USCIS that details security processes](#), and a [letter to the Obama Administration from former US government officials](#).

#### Background: Process for Refugees to be Admitted to the U.S.

- The United States has a proud tradition of leading the world in the number of refugees resettled each year. Each year, the President of the United States authorizes the admission of a certain number of refugees into the country. This determination is based on a consultative process between Congress, the President and various federal agencies.
- Each year, formal consultation also takes place with states, and community stakeholders where refugees are likely to be resettled – to clarify questions and plan for a process that is successful for both the refugees and the receiving communities.
- The US resettled hundreds of thousands of refugees displaced by World War II and after the end of the wars in Southeast Asia, the United States resettled 111,000 Vietnamese refugees in 1979 and then essentially doubled that number to 207,000 in 1980  
<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-annual-refugee-resettlement-ceilings-and-number-refugees-admitted-united>
- In recent years, the U.S. has accepted between 50,000 to 75,000 refugees per year.
- Before a refugee can even be considered to come to the U.S., he or she must first be determined to be eligible. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) — or occasionally a U.S. embassy or another non-governmental organization (NGO) — determines which refugees (about 1 percent) should be resettled, which can take four to 10 months.
- Once a case is referred from the UNHCR to the United States, a refugee undergoes a multi-layered security screening process that could take several rounds, an in-person interview with Department of State personnel, approval by the Department of Homeland Security, medical screening, a match with a sponsor agency, "cultural orientation" classes, and final security screening. This all happens before a refugee ever gets onto American soil.
- This intensive vetting process, as well as U.S law on refugees and asylum seekers, makes it difficult to quickly admit large numbers of refugees. On average, the vetting process takes 18 to 24 months.
- For refugees from Syria and similar countries, however, the process can span two years. Experts confirmed that two years is the average review duration for Syrian refugees, which means that some wait even longer.
- Once they are approved for resettlement in the US, LIRS and its network of partners (as well as the eight other national refugee resettlement organizations) step up to receive refugees and provide cultural orientation, initial housing, English language training, workforce preparation, getting kids in to school, and medical care. This initial help is supported by funding from the US government and private sources. Most refugees are expected to be financially self-sufficient within 90 days.

### Background: U.S. Efforts and Assistance in the Syrian Crisis

- The U.S. government works with the international community to provide humanitarian assistance (\$4B - the most from any single donor), non-lethal transition assistance (\$400M) and training and equipment for the moderate Syrian opposition.
- In addition, non-profit and faith-based organizations have mobilized resources, personnel and expertise to provide assistance in the Middle East and Europe.
- In FY 2015, the US had resettled 1,293 Syrians but expects to resettle 10,000 in FY 2016. That number could change given the impact of refugees we are seeing arrive in Europe. (The number of Syrians resettled in the US from 2011-2014 was only 172 in total).
- In September 2015, the US announced that it will accept 85,000 refugees in 2016, including 10,000 from Syria.
- For the US to admit a significant number of Syrian refugees both reflects our values and is politically wise. Increased U.S. admissions would be a helpful step to relieve pressure on countries in the Middle East that are sheltering millions of refugees and would create less incentive for refugees to make the perilous journey by sea to try to reach Europe. LIRS, as the second largest refugee resettlement organization in the US, and our partners are already welcoming hundreds of Syrian refugees who have often waited for resettlement to the U.S. for several years already. They are already demonstrating their ability to succeed in their new homes, bolstered by the welcome and support they receive from local congregations and communities that are helping them start their new lives.

### Background: U.S. Values

- The principle of protecting refugees is a core part of this country's identity as a nation committed to freedom.
- The legacy of our welcome to refugees is that our economy, social fabric, communities and nation as a whole are stronger.
- Since 1968, the U.S. has recognized its international responsibility to ensure that asylum seekers and refugees are protected and not returned to face persecution or torture in their countries of origin.
- As a leader of democracy in the world, we have a humanitarian duty to provide those escaping persecution the opportunity to seek protection and safe haven – as do the countries of Europe and others.

### Background: For Lutherans/People of Faith:

- Our faith calls us to care for those in need and welcome the stranger. As a nation that has proudly stood as a beacon of hope for those in need, we are defined by our commitment to compassion for the vulnerable and justice for all.
- Lutherans themselves come from refugee and immigrant roots. LIRS was founded more than 75 years ago to protect and provide safety and welcome to Lutheran refugees fleeing World War II, and we are ready to mobilize to welcome those who are fleeing for their lives today from Syria.

- Lutherans are leveraging their strength in local communities, their experience and resources to advocate for Syrians seeking refuge in America. As Syrian refugees are admitted to the U.S., LIRS will continue to work diligently with government, service partners, the ELCA, the LCMS, and Lutheran congregations to ensure they are welcomed, feel safe, and are supported as they rebuild their lives. We ask that you stand with people of faith in welcoming Syrian refugees into the United States, and are inspired by the interest of hundreds of Lutherans in just this last week who are asking how they can help.

Background: Conditions for Syrian refugees (current as of: 11/16/2015)

- More than 50% of the entire population of Syria has been displaced from their homes – by bombardment, civil war, and the growing threat of ISIS.
- Currently, there are 4,287,293 registered Syrian refugees in countries neighboring Syria including persons in: Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, and in several countries in North Africa.
- 76% of these refugees are women and children – imagine, 2 million children who have lost everything.
- Only 12% of refugees across the region live in formal refugee camps. Most live in urban settings.
- But refugees are not allowed to work legally in these countries where they first seek asylum, women who head households are especially vulnerable, and, in some cases, the cash allowance provided by UNHCR to help a refugee pay for housing, food, and medical care has been reduced to \$7 per month per person (Source: UNHCR).
- Syrians now face increasing challenges to find safety and protection in these neighboring countries, which, faced with overwhelming refugee numbers, insufficient international support and security concerns, have taken measures this year to stem the flow of refugees – including restricting access or closer management of borders and introducing complex requirements for refugees to extend their stay.
- In Jordan, the situation for more than 520,000 Syrians living outside the country's refugee camps is increasingly dire. A recent UNHCR assessment showed that 86% of those in urban and rural areas are now living below the poverty line are taking increasingly extreme measures in order to cope, such as reducing their food intake or sending family members – including children – out to beg.
- When LIRS President and CEO Linda Hartke travelled in Jordan earlier this year, one Syrian refugee woman told her she was so desperate she would rather go back to Syria with her children to die than starve to death in a country that was not their homeland.
- In Lebanon, the preliminary findings of a recent vulnerability study found 70% of Syrian refugee households live far below the national poverty line – up from 50% in 2014.
- Across the region, some 700,000 Syrian refugee children were out of school for the school year just passed. Very soon, many refugees who live in sub-standard shelters will face another winter in exile.
- The majority of refugees in Jordan and Lebanon lack the financial resources to contemplate the costly and dangerous journey to Europe.
- But some refugees, who have grown so desperate and have no hope left, risk everything by making a perilous journey by boat to try to reach a future in Europe. Already this year, more than 2,500 refugees have died in the Mediterranean attempting this journey.

## How can you help?

- Contact Governors and local officials in states calling on them to continue to welcome resettled Syrian refugees.
- Designate a Sunday this fall or winter to observe [Refugee Sunday](#). Free materials include a video featuring the story of a Syrian refugee who is now safe in the U.S., and LIRS can help provide a speaker.
- Pray for Syrian refugees (the Refugee Sunday kit includes a worship guide and litany).
- Volunteer with our local refugee resettlement [partner](#) in your community. Help sponsor a family, collect furniture and material goods, be a mentor, or welcome new arrivals at the airport.
- Help support all of LIRS's work with refugees here: [LIRS.org/SupportSyria](http://LIRS.org/SupportSyria). Your gift will enable us to continue to build welcoming communities for refugees and to provide essential support to refugees when they arrive to safety in the U.S.
- For questions, ideas, or to volunteer to assist Syrian and other refugees, contact LIRS toll free at 844-230-2736 or [outreach@lirs.org](mailto:outreach@lirs.org). For questions regarding media and messaging, contact Miji Bell, LIRS Communications, 410-230-2841 or [mbell@lirs.org](mailto:mbell@lirs.org).

*Updated: November 16, 2015*