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TO: Vermont Senate Committee on Appropriations
FROM: U.S. Committee for Refugees & Immigrants (USCRI), Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC), & World Learning/School for International Training (SIT)
DATE: February 5, 2024
SUBJECT: Request for FY2024 Budget Adjustment Act funding for transitional housing of refugees in Vermont

Dear Senators:

On behalf of refugees (“New Vermonters”) and the non-profit organizations who support their resettlement across Vermont, we seek your support of the House-recommended level of funding in the FY2024 Budget Adjustment Act of \$671,000 for “grants to provide transitional housing of refugees” through the General Fund to the State Refugee Office.

Continued state funding for transitional housing of incoming refugees is not only the morally right thing to do, it is also a smart investment for Vermont's future: stimulating economic growth, countering labor shortages, and addressing the challenges of an aging population. Without this funding, the refugee resettlement program in both northern and southern Vermont could face indefinite suspension. Inevitably, this would lead to an increase in homelessness, further economic stagnation, demographic decline, and added pressure on public services for those already in Vermont.

Refugee resettlement highlights:

Since 2022, the Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC) Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation (BDCC), and World Learning/SIT have joined forces to support over 290 refugees in Windham and Bennington counties, resulting in extraordinary benefits to date on local communities, including:

- >90 percent of refugees in southern Vermont have chosen permanent settlement, with an impressive 98 percent securing permanent housing within four months.
- Employment rates are notable, with 83 percent of job-seeking refugees finding employment with 49 local businesses at an average hourly wage of \$19.07 (\$5.40 more than minimum wage), contributing over \$3.7 million (and counting) in annual taxable wages and addressing workforce shortages.

In Chittenden and Rutland counties, the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) resettled 230 refugees and served 58 Ukrainian Humanitarian Parolees during Federal Fiscal Year 2023, of whom:

- Over 82 percent of FY2023 job-seeking refugees have found employment with more than 30 businesses, contributing \$1.5 million (and counting) in taxable wages.

- Since 1980, USCRI Vermont has resettled more than 10,000 refugees and served 220 Afghan Humanitarian Parolees and 90 Ukrainian Humanitarian Parolees. These New Vermonters have built their lives in Vermont, launched careers and businesses, and purchased homes, with some becoming landlords themselves. Children have been able to attend school and helped stabilize student-teacher ratios and classroom sizes.

FY2024 Budget Adjustment Act Request and Rationale:

1. Please support the funding level recommended by the House of \$671,000 in the FY2024 Budget Adjustment Act to sustain transitional housing of refugees through the fiscal year's end.
2. Please stipulate that \$671,000 is for the General Fund to the State Refugee Office for "grants to provide transitional housing of refugees."

Of the \$671,000 for FY2024, approximately \$255,000 would support up to 87 refugees in the southern Vermont refugee transitional housing program run by World Learning/SIT and ECDC.

The cost of the program per person per month is approximately \$600. This includes:

- Maintenance of the dormitories in-use to house refugees throughout the refugees' stay.
- Provision of household items such as bed, dresser, chair, trash bin, desk lamp, linens, and towels.
- Provision of a full kitchen in each residence hall, including large refrigerators/freezers, electric range stovetop/oven, and tables and chairs in dining spaces.
- Utilities, including electricity, heat, water, and Wi-Fi.
- Access to designated dining/welcoming space, prayer room, classroom space, and library.
- Cleaning of common spaces (kitchens and bathrooms) twice a week.
- World Learning/SIT staff time for cleaning, facilities maintenance and repairs, and serving as liaisons between the refugees, ECDC, and community volunteers.

Of the \$671,000 for FY2024, approximately \$350,000 would support 320 refugees across Vermont in a refugee transitional housing program managed by USCRI. This funding will cover significant unexpected temporary housing expenses incurred in FY2024 to date as well as anticipated needs for the remainder of the fiscal year. USCRI has utilized a wide range of options for short-term housing for New Vermonters, primarily in Chittenden County, from motels and AirBnBs to apartment sublets. Anticipated upcoming expenses include:

- Furnishings, appliances, linens and towels, Wi-Fi, utilities, and cleaning services.
- Transitional housing, extended stay hotels, and short-term rental houses, as needed.
- Costs of turning over housing units, including cleaning and maintenance.

On behalf of our organizations and Vermont's refugees, we appreciate your consideration of this request and are available to provide any additional information that your committee might require.

Very sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Amila Merdzanovic".

Amila Merdzanovic, MALD
Field Office Director
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joe Wiah".

Joe Wiah
Executive Director
Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC)

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Carol Jenkins".

Carol Jenkins
CEO
World Learning/SIT