 

To: Members of the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations

From: Mary Kay Sigda on behalf of World Learning/School for International Training (SIT) and ECDC

Date: February 13, 2025

Subject: Testimony in support of continued base funding for transitional housing of refugees in Vermont in the FY2026 Budget

Dear Members of the Committees on Appropriations,

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony on the FY2026 budget. My name is Mary Kay Sigda, and I’m the Senior Program Officer with World Learning/the School for International Training (SIT) for our New Vermonter Education Program (NVEP), which began in 2022 in response to the dire situation facing our Afghan allies.

On behalf of the hundreds of refugees we help resettle throughout the state along with our partners ECDC, USCRI, and Grace Initiatives, I hope you’ll support level funding of $900,000 in the FY2026 Base Budget for grants to the “State Refugee Office to support transitional housing for refugees.”

This request would represent the third year in a row that the state of Vermont has led the nation in providing funding for transitional housing of incoming refugees. Since 2022, Vermont has welcomed approximately 1,300 refugees, and I’ve had the privilege of working with many of them. I can personally attest to their deep desire to become part of the Vermont community and contribute both their skills and hard work to its growth and economic development. For example, a Congolese doctor who once worked with Doctors Without Borders is now a medical assistant at a local practice here in southern Vermont. An Afghan aid worker is now a case manager at our local housing authority. And a 79-year-old Venezuelan grandfather is one of the fastest and most dedicated employees at a wood plank company. Their resilience and contributions are truly inspiring and are breathing life into our communities.

Most of the refugees we support choose to stay in Vermont after being welcomed into transitional housing and receiving services such as English language instruction, cultural orientation health screenings, and workforce training. In fact, the overwhelming majority of job-seeking refugees have found employment among local employers and have already contributed over $7 million to the state in annual taxable wages.

Our statewide request of $900,000 in the FY2026 base budget for the “State Refugee Office to support transitional housing for refugees” is supported in Governor Scott’s budget proposal for the Agency of Human Services. Your ongoing support will ensure that USCRI, ECDC, Grace Initiative Global, and World Learning/SIT are able to continue welcoming refugees across our state, including secondary refugees who see that life in Vermont is exceptional, and provide them with the same transitional housing that has made long-term resettlement so successful here.

Thank you for your steadfast support of welcoming refugees and for considering this vital funding request.