

The Honorable Harry Reid
Senate Majority Leader
522 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

March 26, 2012

Dear Senate Majority Leader Reid,

We applaud the Senate for passing unanimously the “Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Extension for Elderly and Disabled Refugees Act of 2011” (S. 1721) on October 14, 2011. As you know, the bill would extend elderly and disabled refugees’ eligibility for SSI from seven years to nine years and offsets costs by requiring a fee on diversity visa applications. The bipartisan companion bill (H.R. 3083) has been introduced in the House but has failed to advance. In the coming months, as both chambers consider measures intended to bolster a struggling economy and improve social safety nets, we urge you to include an extension of SSI benefits for humanitarian migrants.

While most refugees are able to adapt and thrive in the United States, there are some who need the additional support of SSI. To be eligible for this means-tested benefit, a person must be elderly or disabled and have limited financial resources. SSI is a modest stipend, but for those living in poverty, it offers a critical lifeline. Under current law, refugees and other humanitarian migrants are eligible for SSI for the first seven years of their residence in the United States, after which they must become U.S. citizens to continue receiving support. However, for older adults and for those living with a disability, naturalization is a daunting process. For these populations, the very characteristics that necessitate SSI make retaining this assistance through citizenship very difficult.

Many refugees who have lost their SSI are Jews and Evangelicals from the former Soviet Union, Cubans, Iranians, and Southeast Asians who served alongside U.S. forces during the Vietnam War. These are people who have endured great personal hardship to make it to the United States, coming to our nation seeking refuge from tyranny and oppression and an opportunity to live in peace and make a brighter future. For these migrants, SSI offers a crucial support as they work to rebuild their lives in a safe place.

The United States admits refugees and other humanitarian migrants with the promise of security and protection against the persecution they encountered in their home countries. Yet for many, this promise is broken after seven years simply because they cannot learn English or pass a civics test. Thousands have already seen their benefits terminated, and hundreds more will lose their SSI each month. Providing a minimum level of basic assistance is necessary to keep that promise. Congress passed and President Bush signed into law a bipartisan extension of SSI in 2008. We, the undersigned organizations, urge you act immediately to reinstate and extend SSI eligibility for this vulnerable group of refugees and humanitarian migrants.

Sincerely,

Organizations

Americans for Immigrant Justice
Anti-Defamation League (ADL)
Asian American Justice Center (AAJC), a member of the Asian American Center for Advancing Justice
Asian Law Alliance
Catholic Charities Office for Social Justice
Catholic Charities USA
Florida Coastal Legal Clinic
Florida Coastal School of Law, Immigrant Rights Clinic
Florida Impact
Florida Institutional Legal Services, Inc.
Florida Legal Services, Inc.
Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS)
HIAS Chicago
Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota
Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project
International Rescue Committee (IRC)
Jacksonville Area Legal Aid
Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA)
Jewish Community Action (JCA)
Jewish Council on Urban Affairs (JCUA)
Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA)
Jewish Reconstructionist Federation
Jubilee Campaign USA, Inc.
Kentucky Equal Justice Center
Legal Aid Service of Broward County, Inc.
Lutheran Community Services Northwest
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS)
Multicultural Community Resource Center
National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW)
National Senior Citizens Law Center (NSCLC)
National Immigration Law Center (NILC)
Refugee Immigration Project, Jacksonville (FL) Area Legal Aid
Sant La
Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC)
St. Johns County Legal Aid
The Advocates for Human Rights
US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
Vermont Immigration and Asylum Advocates
Women of Reform Judaism

Individuals

Amy McKendry, Education Coordinator
International Rescue Committee, Charlottesville, VA

Anne L. Crotty, Director, Ginter Immigration Law Clinic
International House, Charlotte, NC

Antonio M. Gomez, Intake Advisor, Project Transition Refugee Program
School District of Palm Beach County, West Palm Beach, FL

Barbara Cabell, Manager, Resettlement Services
International Rescue Committee, Charlottesville, VA

Edward A. Dimayuga
Legal Aid Society of the Orange County Bar Association, Orlando, FL

Elaine Carson, Director
World Relief Jacksonville, Jacksonville, FL

Elizabeth Rutten-Turner, ESL/Migrant Teacher Trainer
Yates Community Center, Omaha, NE

Ellen Sekreta, Staff Attorney
Legal Services of Central New York, Inc., Utica, NY

Gordana Katardzic
Ecumenical Refugee & Immigration Services, Denver, CO

Gregory Wangerin, Executive Director
RefugeeOne, Chicago, IL

Harriet Kuhr, Executive Director
International Rescue Committee, Charlottesville, VA

Janet Panning, Program Director
Lutheran Children and Family Service of Eastern Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA

Jesus Garcia, Refugee Programs Coordinator
Youth Co-op, Inc., Miami, FL

Jonathan Stein, General Counsel
Community Legal Services, Philadelphia, PA

Judy Siskind, Staff Psychologist
Epilepsy Foundation of Florida, Miami, FL

Julie Lewis, Director of Refugee Resettlement
Catholic Charities Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma City, OK

Julio R. Rivera, Case Manager
Catholic Charities of Central Florida, Orlando, FL

Karen Brodsky, Community Resource Coordinator
Carolina Refugee Resettlement Agency, Charlotte, NC

Karen Monken, Refugee Processing Manager
World Relief, Baltimore, MD

Kheir Mugwaneza, Director, Community Assistance and Refugee Resettlement
Northern Area Multi-Service Center, Pittsburgh, PA

Libby Palmer
Port Townsend, WA

Lindsay Losasso, Program & Grants Manager
Squirrel Hill Health Center, Pittsburgh, PA

Luisa Acosta, Accounting Analyst, Project Transition Refugee Program
School District of Palm Beach County, West Palm Beach, FL

Lyndy Meister, Case Worker
International Rescue Committee, Charlottesville, VA

Megan Wall, Managing Attorney
St. Johns County Legal Aid, St. Augustine, FL

Melissa Engle, Immigration Counselor
Church World Service, Lancaster, PA

Meredith Wipf, School Readiness Specialist
Heartland Family Service, Omaha, NE

Neil Grungras, Executive Director
Organization for Refuge, Asylum, and Migration (ORAM), San Francisco, CA

Nicky Clark, MSW, Coordinator, Ready in 5
Heartland Family Service, Omaha, NE

Nicole DeCarufel, Match Grant Employment Specialist
Catholic Charities of Central Florida, Orlando, FL

Noel Hernandez Valdes, Project Transition Refugee Educational Program Supervisor
School District of Palm Beach, West Palm Beach, FL

Norma Guggisberg, Paralegal
Americans for Immigrant Justice, Miami, FL

Oscar Alvarez, BIA Accredited Representative
Americans for Immigrant Justice, Miami, FL

Rabbi Michael E. Feinberg, Executive Director
Greater New York Labor-Religion Coalition, New York, NY

Raul Hernandez, Volunteer Coordinator
Refugee Program, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Miami, Miami, FL

Robert Bertisch, Executive Director
Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County, Inc., West Palm Beach, FL

Sarah Hayes, Older Refugee Coordinator
Catholic Social Services, Refugee Assistance and Immigration Services (RAIS), Anchorage, AK

Stephen P. Letourneau, CEO
Catholic Charities Maine, Portland, ME

Steve Walker
Consultant Refugee Services, Columbus, OH

Suzy M. Cop, Executive Director
International Rescue Committee, Miami, FL

Terri Anne Di Cintio, Community Relations Coordinator
International Rescue Committee, Charlottesville, VA

Terry A. Coble, Esq., Policy & Program Director
Miami Coalition for the Homeless, Miami, FL

Tori Bender, Student of Social Work
Heartland Family Service, Omaha, NE

Vladimir Novac, Refugee Youth and Family Specialist
Gulf Coast Jewish Family and Community Services, Tampa, FL

Wendi Adelson, Esq., Visiting Clinical Professor, Director of Medical Legal Partnership
Florida State University College of Law, Tallahassee, FL