



## Committee on Migration

c/o Migration and Refugee Services, USCCB

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Dear Senator/Representative:

As Congress begins its work on Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 appropriations, many of the policy committees of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) will be engaging lawmakers on appropriations matters under their purview, expressing views on funding that supports the poor, migrants and refugees, foreign assistance, environmental protection, access to healthcare, housing, and nutrition, and other programs that help individuals and families to live with dignity. Together, these views represent the wide breadth of concern of the bishops in the budget and appropriations process. Today, I write on behalf of the USCCB's Committee on Migration to request your support for our funding priorities related to agencies and programs that are crucial for the wellbeing of immigrants, refugees, asylees, asylum seekers, unaccompanied migrant children, survivors of torture, victims of human trafficking, and others. Please consider including the following requests in your FY 2024 funding proposals:

### Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies (CJS)

We appreciate the Administration's request for increased funding for the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) in its FY 2024 budget, most of which is intended for its Backlog Reduction Initiative. This includes a proposal to add 150 new immigration judges, associated support staff, and necessary space and equipment requirements, consistent with longstanding need and our recommendations over the last several years. With almost 800,000 asylum applications pending before the immigration courts and nearly 1.8 million immigration court cases pending in total,<sup>1</sup> we urge Congress to support an expansion of EOIR's capabilities in FY 2024 to better ensure timely adjudication of cases and facilitate due process for noncitizens.

In addition to EOIR's backlog reduction efforts, we strongly support increased funding for Legal Access Programs, which includes the Legal Orientation Program, the Legal Orientation Program for Custodians of Unaccompanied Children, and the Recognition and Accreditation (R&A) Program. Collectively, these programs not only provide crucial legal information to those with immigration court cases but also help streamline proceedings, making them more efficient. We commend the Administration's request of **\$150 million** for a new grant program to facilitate access to legal representation and encourage Congress to support this initiative.

EOIR's R&A Program has operated since 1958 to increase the number of qualified immigration legal representatives available to serve low-income immigrants, especially where there is a shortage of immigration attorneys. This program has struggled in recent years to maintain sufficient personnel and resources to process new and renewal applications for recognition of organizations and accreditation of representatives. There have been significant backlogs, leaving applicants waiting more than a year for adjudication because the program is underfunded and understaffed.<sup>2</sup> The backlogs have only been reduced due to temporary reassignments; permanent resource allocation is necessary to support this essential program. Therefore, we ask that **\$3.5 million** specifically be appropriated to EOIR for the purpose of increasing R&A staffing and improving the program's operations.

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<sup>1</sup> EOIR, *EOIR Adjudication Statistics: Total Asylum Applications*, <https://bit.ly/2Oo9ZSV> (last visited Mar. 29, 2023); EOIR, *FY 2024 Performance Budget Congressional Budget Submission* (Mar. 2023), <https://bit.ly/3KgEN23>.

<sup>2</sup> Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., *CLINIC Policy Brief: The Severely Under-Resourced R&A Program is An Essential Tool to Meet growing Needs for Affordable Immigration Legal Services* (Sept. 2021), <https://bit.ly/3IYPbCh>.

Lastly, we affirm the Administration's request of **\$90 million** to support human trafficking grant programs that facilitate comprehensive and specialized services for human trafficking victims.

### **Department of Homeland Security (DHS)**

The Catholic Church acknowledges the right of countries to uphold their borders and the responsibility of governments to protect the people within their borders, consistent with the common good. At the same time, we believe that right and responsibility should be exercised in a manner that is consistent with the moral obligation to protect the humanitarian needs of migrants and refugees. More prosperous nations have a greater obligation to accommodate those needs and can do so in a manner that does not jeopardize the safety or wellbeing of their citizens.

We support an enforcement system that defaults to community-based alternatives to detention (ATD), particularly those that utilize case management and direct service provision by qualified nonprofit organizations. Nearly all people navigating their immigration cases should be able to do so from home with their families, not behind bars in immigration detention, while accounting for those who pose genuine risks to public safety or national security. We appreciate the additional \$20 million appropriated in FY 2023 for the Case Management Pilot Program overseen by the DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties. We support the Administration's request of **\$15 million** to continue this program in FY 2024. We also urge robust oversight and continued efforts to ensure that NGO service providers can refer individuals into such programming to promote stabilization and help noncitizens to navigate the complex legal requirements imposed on them and comply with immigration proceedings.

We support the Administration's FY 2024 request of **\$865 million** for United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to address work authorization, naturalization, and asylum backlogs, support refugee processing, and allow for systems and operations modernization. We continue to urge appropriators to closely monitor USCIS staffing and other resources to ensure it is using all of the tools available to it to provide sufficient capacity to address the asylum backlog, restore refugee admissions to historical norms, process naturalization applications, and process visa petitions for religious workers who do so much to help the communities they serve.

Pope Francis has said that "immigrants, if they are helped to integrate, are a blessing, a source of enrichment and new gift that encourages a society to grow."<sup>3</sup> Consistent with this reality, we request that **\$35 million** be appropriated for FY 2024 to expand the USCIS Citizenship and Integration Grant Program, with **\$10 million** to be used to increase the capacity of national, regional, and statewide organizations to work with their affiliates, members, and partners to offer citizenship services in underserved communities. We urge that **\$8 million** be appropriated for FY 2024 to fund the Office of Citizenship, which furthers the national interest by encouraging qualified legal permanent residents to commit to and fully integrate into the United States through citizenship. We ask Congress to support the timely processing of citizenship and other applications, with a goal of eliminating the naturalization backlog in its entirety and adjudicating all requests within six months or less of submission. We note that it is vital for Congress to conduct oversight to ensure this occurs without imposing non-adjudicatory costs on U.S. businesses, families, and other sponsors and applicants.

We appreciate that the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 extended the Non-Minister Special Immigrant Religious Worker Visa Program until September of this year, and we ask that Congress permanently reauthorize this small but important program in FY 2024 appropriations. In addition, we ask Congress to include report language with appropriations requiring that concurrent filing and premium processing be available to religious workers seeking to be permanent residents for greater parity with other employment-based categories. Finally, since 2016, there has been a sharp increase in the number of applicants for Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) classification. These vulnerable children and foreign-born religious workers both depend on the employment-based, fourth preference (EB-4) immigrant visa. Given this increased number of SIJ applicants and a recent policy change made

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 135 (Oct. 3, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3DqdiB>.

by the Department of State,<sup>4</sup> the wait time for an EB-4 visa has increased to over four years for most nationalities, far longer than any other employment-based visa.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, we ask that Congress allocate additional visas to the EB-4 category or specifically allocate visas for SIJ applicants as part of the FY 2024 appropriations process.

### **Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies (LHHS)**

We commend the Administration for the increase in funding for the Refugee and Entrant Assistance (REA) account proposed in its FY 2024 request. We ask that Congress build on the Administration's request by appropriating **\$11.188 billion** for the REA account, an amount we believe would better enable the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to serve populations of concern and respond to emergent needs. Through the REA account, ORR serves refugees, unaccompanied children, asylees, Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa recipients, Cuban and Haitian entrants, survivors of human trafficking and torture, and certain humanitarian parolees, as authorized by Congress. Thus far, for FY 2023, Congress has enacted over \$8.561 billion for REA. The increase we propose can be attributed to multiple factors, including ongoing efforts to return refugee arrivals to a level more consistent with the historical average, the continued arrival of Ukrainians through the Uniting for Ukraine program, and a significant rise in the number of Cuban and Haitian entrants seeking services.

Within the topline funding that we recommend for the REA account, we also support **\$8 billion** in baseline funding to serve foreign-national unaccompanied children (UC) in FY 2024. With this funding, we urge ORR to dedicate resources toward serving the best interests of UC in its care, including by increasing the percentage of children receiving critical family reunification services (i.e., home studies and post-release services). Additionally, we welcome the Administration's requested **\$360 million** for legal representation of UC, furthering the worthwhile goal of universal representation for vulnerable children.

The USCCB has long supported the creation of a contingency fund that can be used to serve the range of populations for which ORR is responsible, accounting for emergencies and unexpected increases in need. Therefore, we greatly appreciate the Administration's request for contingency funding to serve UC, based on the number of children referred to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in a given month during FY 2024, which mirrors the contingency funding model adopted by Congress in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023. Since 2013, we have witnessed a series of sudden increases in the number of UC entering the care of HHS, requiring ORR to divert resources away from other populations and programs. Similarly, we support the similar contingencies proposed by the Administration to ensure adequate services can be provided to other populations served by ORR, based on the combined total of Cuban-Haitian entrants and those granted asylum. This approach reflects the nature of forced displacement and promotes equitable service provision across all eligible populations.

Within the \$11.188 billion in funding that we recommend for the REA account, we ask Congress to appropriate **\$50 million** for the Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP). OTIP provides critical services to trafficking victims and facilitates recovery and self-sufficiency. In addition to foreign nationals, HHS also provides services to U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents impacted by human trafficking through the Domestic Victims of Human Trafficking (DVHT) Program with funding from the REA account. We also ask Congress to appropriate the Administration's requested **\$130 million** for the Department of Labor's International Labor Affairs Bureau (ILAB), as ILAB plays a critical role in efforts to eradicate child labor.

### **State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS)**

We request that Congress appropriate at least **\$4.112 billion** for the Department of State's Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account, **\$100 million** for the Department's Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA) account, and **\$4.899 billion** for the International Disaster Assistance (IDA) account administered by the

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<sup>4</sup> Department of State, *Employment-Based Fourth Preference (EB-4) Announcement*, <https://bit.ly/3zzPIxL> (last updated Mar. 28, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> See Department of State, *Visa Bulletin for April 2023*, <https://bit.ly/3KzncTc> (last updated Mar. 22, 2023).

United States Agency for International Development (USAID). We believe these amounts would ensure that the State Department and USAID can further the U.S. commitment to refugee protection, promote national and global security by stabilizing refugees and other forcibly displaced populations abroad, and respond to numerous humanitarian crises, including those in Eastern Europe and Latin America. Due to budgetary constraints relating to appropriations for FYs 2022 and 2023, Congress augmented base funding for these years with additional funding in a supplemental title of the omnibus. Should Congress, again, simultaneously appropriate supplemental funding along with base funding for FY 2024, these requests would be amended to better reflect ongoing needs.

We further ask that Congress appropriate **\$126 million** for State Department programs designed to combat the global scourge of human trafficking under the headings of “Development Assistance”, “Economic Support Fund”, “Assistance for Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia”, and “International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement.” Moreover, we affirm the Administration’s request of **\$66 million** for the operational costs of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.

Finally, we urge that the Lautenberg Amendment, which has facilitated the protection and resettlement of persecuted religious minorities since 1990, including many Ukrainians, be extended permanently.

### **Protection of Life**

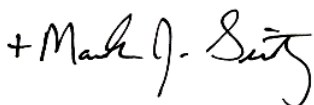
We strongly hold that the protection of unborn lives cannot be separated from any work that aims at ensuring justice and flourishing for every human being. The U.S. bishops remain gravely concerned about continued efforts to expand taxpayer funding of abortion, which would occur if the Hyde Amendment or any of the other life-saving appropriations riders were to be removed from the annual appropriations bills. It is vital that the Hyde Amendment and all related life-saving appropriations riders remain in place during the 118th Congress and beyond. The USCCB will oppose any bill that expands taxpayer funding of abortion, including any appropriations bill.

### **Conclusion**

It is the mission of the Catholic Church to bring to the present times the teachings of Jesus Christ, which remind us daily that all are created in God’s image and every human person deserves to be treated with respect in accordance with his or her inherent dignity. The work of the USCCB on behalf of newcomers is part of our ongoing effort to live out this teaching. As a Church at the service of all God’s people, the USCCB stands ready to work with our nation’s leaders to protect marginalized people, promote human life and dignity, and advance the common good.

Thank you for considering our recommendations and for your service to our country.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Mark J. Seitz". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Most Reverend Mark J. Seitz  
Bishop of El Paso  
Chairman, USCCB Committee on Migration