

Senator Charles E. Schumer – Statement for the Record – October 1, 2015
“Oversight of the Administration’s FY 2016 Refugee Resettlement Program:
Fiscal and Security Implications”

As Pope Francis pointed out last week in an address to Congress, the world is facing the largest refugee crisis since World War II. Over four million Syrians are fleeing their homeland to escape a brutal dictator, Bashar al-Assad, who has committed atrocities against tens of thousands of his own people – indiscriminately bombing villages, towns and cities full of innocent civilians in his fight against rebel groups, and cutting his people off from food, water, and electricity. It’s not just Syria. Across the world, refugees are fleeing persecution. Whether it’s Ukrainians displaced by Russian-backed separatist forces, persecuted Iranian religious minorities, Christians, Yazidis and others fleeing ISIL, Congolese escaping civil war, or others –tens of thousands of persecuted people are looking to the United States for help.

How should America respond? We must respond as we always have, with sagacity and clear-eyed generosity and compassion. As we have helped past refugees fleeing Communist repressing in Cuba, Vietnam and the former Soviet Union, so we must seek to help those now displaced by global calamities, genocide, war and brutal regimes. Annually, we resettle over half of all refugees referred by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – more than the other 29 resettlement countries combined – representing over 50 nationalities per year. We are by far the largest single donor to UNHCR, providing over \$1.28 billion in FY 2014. We have contributed over \$4 billion in international aid directly responding to the crisis in Syria. And we are now expanding our refugee program to welcome more and resettle them in our communities.

In order to be a humane and just nation, something that undergirds America’s international prestige and power, these are the things we must do. But to address the topic of today’s hearing, we must continue to do this without posing risks to our national security. To be clear, Congress long ago put in place a law prohibiting any immigrant – refugee, tourist, or worker – from entering the United States if that person has materially assisted a terrorist organization. As a result of this law, all immigrants but especially refugees undergo extensive national security and criminal background checks. Let’s not forget that, on average, it takes 18-24 months for a refugee to be resettled in the U.S. – that’s because they face a suite of intensive background checks multiple times throughout their application process.

Those checks are absolutely vital, but they do not prevent us from helping those who truly need and deserve refugee protections. We can do both. We can shield those fleeing persecution while maintaining the vigorous security checks and precautions we take when admitting people to our country.

Refugees add vitality to our communities and re-energize local economies. Many have heard me tell the success story of Utica, New York, where refugees from Bosnia, Belarus, Russia, Somalia, the Dominican Republic and Vietnam have played a pivotal role revitalizing the city by starting businesses, creating jobs and generating a virtuous economic and cultural cycle for that community.. There are cities across the country that have benefited in similar ways.

As we debate how to handle the refugee crisis we face today, we should all take stock of Pope Francis’ eloquent reminder that the yardstick we use for others will be the yardstick which time

will use for us. In this respect, we have an exceptional legacy. Here in America we welcome strangers seeking asylum; we accept, “the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” And as I have made clear, we can do so without compromising our national security.