

SB-230 Testimony
Kate Waidler, Ph.D.

Mr. Chair ~~Foot~~^{Kennedy}, members of the committee, Thank you for the opportunity to present to you today. My name is Kate Waidler, representing the Refugee Action Coalition of Colorado, and I am here to support SB230.

Photos of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi lying dead face down on a Turkish beach seared the collective conscience of people around the world in the fall 2015. The image of this little refugee broke my heart and caused me, along with many others across the U.S., to pay attention to humanitarian disaster left in the wake of civil war in Syria, and to ask the question of how we, as human beings, ought to respond.

The question we're discussing today: why should Colorado commit to supporting the United States Refugee Resettlement Program? We've heard about some of the ways in which refugees strengthen and diversify our communities and how they contribute to our local economies in addition to the many other ways refugee families positively impact our State. I want to return to some of humanitarian reasons for supporting resettlement in Colorado.

There are a staggering number of displaced persons across the globe: 68.5 million refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people throughout the world. 25.4 million of these are officially classified as refugees by the United Nations, and over half of these are children. As the Syrian war goes winds down after more than eight years of catastrophic conflict, as Rohingya Muslims flee violence and persecution, the refugee crises across Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe have continuously escalated, in addition to large numbers of people who have been forced by war and violence to leave their homes in Africa, South America, and other places around the world. Countries throughout these regions are unfortunately closing their borders – some of them overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of refugees, others caving to populist fears. The result is that millions of people languish in refugee camps without the hope of a secure and stable future for their families.

In the United States the number of refugees admitted into our resettlement program has dropped from 85,000 in 2015 to under 20,000 projected for 2018. This past September, the administration lowered the ceiling of the number of refugees permitted into the U.S. to a historic low of only 25,000 for the next fiscal year and the actual numbers of those being admitted aren't even half of this. Why should we be disturbed by the fact that the U.S. is pulling its support from its Resettlement Program in the face of the greatest crisis of our time? I highlight here three reasons:

- (1) We have a **collective responsibility** along with other members of the international community to provide refuge to the victims of war & violence. The U.S. with its immense resources has an important role to play in the collective responsibility of the international community to provide necessary relief to those fleeing war and violence. The truth is that the vast majority of refugees are

hosted by just 10 countries who are bearing a very heavy burden -- among them Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia. Countries that often have fewer resources than many of those who are doing little or nothing.¹ We can and should do more to share this burden.

- (2) **American values of pluralism and diversity** are in peril if we refuse to admit people different religions and ethnicities – this gives rise to ideologies similar to those of the terrorists we oppose and opens the doors to a dangerous demagoguery.
- (3) The current refugee crisis is a **test of our common humanity**. Are we going to be the kind of nation that gives in to suspicion and fear and builds walls, or are we going to be the kind of nation that value the inherent worth of all human beings?

What kind of community do we want to be as Coloradans? The image of Aylan Kurdi on the beach in Turkey may seem really far away. But what kind of contribution might he have made if he had been allowed to live, to have a safe and secure home, allowed to flourish in a place like Colorado? As I listen to the stories and learn about the lives of the refugees – like our friends here—I feel privileged to be part of a community that welcomes the world’s most vulnerable and helps by providing them the resources to begin again in a home that is safe, with the opportunity for hope and a promising future.

¹ Barack Obama, Speech at the United Nations Leadership Summit on Refugees, September 20, 2016. New York, New York.