November 18, 2015

As an interdisciplinary children’s rights center working on issues affecting children both locally and globally, we write to express our support for the U.S. refugee resettlement program including the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Illinois and throughout the nation. The world is witnessing the largest refugee crisis since World War II, with nearly 60 million displaced people according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), half of whom are children. Thousands of Syrians have been killed, millions displaced by ISIS and the Assad regime, and they seek sanctuary and protection which the United States can provide.

We mourn for those in Paris who suffered recent losses and tragedy at the hands of devastating violence, along with the victims of attacks in Beirut, Baghdad, Ankara, and the downing of a Russian airliner. We must rise to the challenge, however, and not permit these horrific acts to betray our values as compassionate citizens of a great nation and members of a Jesuit and Catholic institution. If we allow fear and ignorance to categorize one group of people – based on their faith, religion, or country of origin – as more “deserving” than another, then terrorism has defeated our nation and our way of life.

Moreover, we must be mindful of the principles, values, and laws that protect our most vulnerable members of society – children and refugees – for it is in times such as these that our policies are called upon to truly serve their purpose. International and federal law designate refugees as specific persons who demonstrate that they were persecuted or fear persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. A refugee may not be someone who participated in the persecution of any person on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. As a result, refugees are the most thoroughly vetted group of people who enter the United States, with more exhaustive screening and security programs in place to protect our national security than any other arrival into the United States. Our government often selects the most vulnerable refugees who are unable to remain in their home countries. Refugees have been part of the American landscape for generations - ever since the founding fathers came to America because they were persecuted or feared persecution for their beliefs.

Turning our back on refugees will not make us safer. It creates even more vulnerable and marginalized children and families, subject to greater violence and fewer opportunities to make a meaningful contribution to the world. We encourage our state and federal government to welcome refugees from Syria, particularly so that these children may one day serve our nation, but also so that they may remind us of the meaning of American generosity.

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2 Section 101(a)(42) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA)