



## Committee on Migration

**c/o Migration and Refugee Services, USCCB**

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June 13, 2017

House Committee on the Judiciary  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Goodlatte and Ranking Member Conyers:

I write on behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration (USCCB/COM) to express our strong opposition to H.R. 2826, the "Refugee Program Integrity Restoration Act of 2017," and H.R. 495, the "Protection of Children Act of 2017," which are scheduled for markup in your committee this Wednesday, June 14, 2017.

A core teaching of the Catholic faith is that every person is created in the image of God and is therefore entitled to dignity and respect. The Catholic Church views assisting those in need as a fundamental Christian duty that is derived directly from the life of Christ, who himself was a migrant and a child of refugees. While the Catholic Church recognizes governments' right to control their borders and enforce immigration laws, we hold a strong and pervasive pastoral interest in the welfare and humane treatment of refugees and immigrants. USCCB works to fulfill the teachings of the Church on migration, in part through our work providing resettlement services to refugees, as well as providing community-based shelter care and family reunification services to unaccompanied immigrant children in the United States.

H.R. 2826 would seriously undermine our nation's longstanding leadership in the area of refugee protection. H.R. 2826 seeks to seriously curtail the protections we as a nation provide vulnerable people fleeing persecution. The bill would reduce and cap refugee admissions to 50,000 individuals, marking a dramatic reduction in U.S. resettlement. It would also implement new requirements and procedures that would significantly delay and potentially bar resettlement for many refugees whose lives are in danger. The bill further would revoke refugee status of any individual who returns to their country of origin, even if only briefly for a funeral or family emergency. H.R. 2826 would also allow state and local governments to halt all resettlement into their communities should they so choose. Given the danger, persecution, and suffering faced by the 65 million people around the world who have been forcibly displaced from their homes, we cannot afford to turn our back on those seeking protection.

Furthermore, H.R. 2826 would hamper refugees' integration by tripling the period in current law before a refugee can become a lawful permanent resident. The Catholic Church has worked for years, in many instances in partnership with the federal government, to facilitate and promote refugee integration. This measure would undermine those efforts and is contrary to who we are as a nation – a country built on the contributions of immigrants and refugees.

In sum, H.R. 2826 would essentially cripple the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, which has been a life-saving humanitarian program for nearly four decades. The United States must not reject its tradition of welcome and record of humanitarian leadership. Recognizing that all are children of God, we should continue to protect refugees of all nationalities, ethnicities, and religions based on their vulnerability. My brother

bishops and I firmly believe we, as a nation, can continue to offer welcome to newcomers with love and compassion while still ensuring the security of our nation. H.R. 2826 does not achieve our security goals in a humane or just manner.

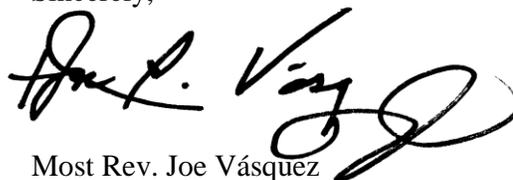
We further write to express our opposition to H.R. 495 which would rescind essential protections for unaccompanied immigrant children. Among its provisions, H.R. 495 undermines the existing framework for referring unaccompanied children to the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). ORR was determined by the Homeland Security Act of 2002 to be the agency most appropriately suited to care for these children, in large part due to their demonstrated child welfare expertise. Instead, HR 495 would require the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to screen all unaccompanied children and limit referral only of children whom CBP finds to have fear of persecution or be subject to trafficking risks. This presents protection concerns with the adequacy of screening and is not the best use of our governmental resources. We greatly respect the work of CBP officers and recognize their contributions to defending our country, but they are law enforcement officers – not trained asylum officers or child welfare experts.

H.R. 495 further limits unaccompanied children's ability to access justice. It prohibits government funds from being used to provide legal counsel to the children and would revise certain legal thresholds for protection, making it more difficult for children to obtain legal relief. The bill also requires ORR to share information with DHS, including immigration status, regarding family members (sponsors) to whom unaccompanied children are released pending their immigration proceedings. If the sponsor is undocumented, H.R. 495 would require DHS to initiate removal proceedings.

Our faith calls on us to oppose such proposals which would lead to the inhumane and unjust treatment of these children. As Pope Francis has said: "Among migrants, children constitute the most vulnerable group, because as they face the life ahead of them, they are invisible and voiceless." We must recognize this vulnerability and remember when forming our laws and policies that many unaccompanied children are fleeing for their lives. Our committee is concerned that the changes proposed in H.R. 495 would result in children being returned to situations of persecution and trafficking due to improper screening, lack of counsel, and unjust legal thresholds to relief. Moreover, we fear that the bill would create a chilling effect on sponsors' willingness to come forward to care for children pending their removal proceedings. This would lead to unnecessary family separation and increase costs on the government for children's prolonged care. The bill is contrary to our moral obligation to ensure that unaccompanied immigrant children receive proper care, are reunited with their families when possible, and have a fair opportunity to seek protection.

In conclusion, our committee finds these two bills deeply troubling and does not believe they advance the goal of humane and just immigration reform. We call on you to ensure that refugees continue to be welcomed and that unaccompanied immigrant children continue to be viewed as children first and foremost. In doing so, we ask you to oppose H.R. 2826 and H.R. 495.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joe P. Vasquez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "V" and "Q".

Most Rev. Joe Vásquez  
Bishop of Austin  
Chairman, USCCB Committee on Migration