

Media Release

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National Refugee Leaders Urge Family Values in Immigration Reform

Washington, D.C. –Today the U.S. Senate continues debate on the compromise immigration reform proposal announced by key senators last week. Of particular importance to refugee communities will be the debate on the proposed restrictions and elimination of certain family immigration categories and amendments on fixing these provisions. As it stands, the proposal completely eliminates the adult children and sibling categories of the current family-based immigration system and replaces it with a merit-based system which unjustly impacts many refugees with legal permanent resident status and citizenship who wish to reunite with these family members. While the proposal would not eliminate the ability of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents to bring over their spouses and minor children, it also severely cuts parent visas from 90,000 to 40,000.

The newly proposed merit-based system prioritizes and provides points for employment, education and English skills over family ties in the U.S., which puts former refugees wishing to reunite with their families at a huge disadvantage. Family members, like many refugees themselves, escaping oppressive governments, poverty, war and conflict among other life threatening situations, often do not have the privileges to access to education and English training and therefore, are adversely impacted by a merit-based system which heavily awards points based on levels of education and English language skills.

“This proposal unfairly impacts refugee communities by prioritizing standards that are not accessible to many abroad,” says Sky Salvail-Hotrich, Interim Chief Executive Officer for Hmong National Development, Inc. “It does not respect family values and contributes to the separation of families. We need to ensure that comprehensive immigration reform does not come at the cost of families who want to reunite through the proper channels.”

Dr. Pary Karadaghi, President & CEO of Kurdish Human Rights Watch points out that “Women abroad who are often not able to access the same educational and professional opportunities as men will also be negatively affected by the point system.”

“Family immigration has been the cornerstone of our immigration system because of the American value on family. Eliminating important family categories will harm not only families wishing to reunite with their loved ones, but whole refugee communities who often rely on

family in helping them integrate into American society,” said Huy Bui, Executive Director of the National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies.

Dr. Tsehay Teferra, President of the Ethiopian Community Development Council adds, “Family unity is the foundation for effective integration in many refugee communities. Family members inspire and motivate each other to succeed and pursue the American dream. Our immigration system should reflect the values of hard work and family unity.”

Doua Thor, Executive Director of the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC) adds, “The proposal seeks to invalidate any family based visa application submitted after May 2005 and retroactively subject these applicants to a merit based system that was not in place when they applied to sponsor their adult children and siblings. This will unfairly impact hundreds of thousands of people seeking to reunite with their families.”

“Strong families are the backbone to vibrant American communities,” states Laotian American National Alliance’s President, Phoumy Sayavong. “Through family based immigration, immigrant and refugee communities all across the U.S. have shown that in family partnerships, they can own and sustain their own businesses, completely revitalize some of America’s most impoverished neighborhoods and be major contributors to the economy. Family based immigration is an invaluable asset to our communities that we cannot afford to lose.”

“We cannot support a system that undermines American family values. We urge Senators to seriously revisit these provisions to the family immigration system and the impact it has on American families who have abided by the rules,” said BryAnn Chen, Executive Director of Refugee Women’s Network, Inc.

Somali Family Care Network President, Raqiya Abdalla adds, “There are some good provisions in this bill but there is still much to be done to improve it. We are committed to working with legislators on ensuring that the result of this immigration reform bill is truly comprehensive and that it does not undermine our family values.”

National refugee organizations and their local networks will continue to closely monitor this bill as it moves through Congress.

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Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC), Hmong National Development (HND), Kurdish Human Rights Watch (KHRW), Laotian American National Alliance (LANA), National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies (NAVASA), Refugee Women’s Network (RWN), Somali Family Care Network (SFCN) and Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC) are all members of a coalition of national Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs) who are all national community based organizations instrumental in advancing economic self-sufficiency and overall community integration among resettled refugees, regardless of how long they have lived in the U.S. MAAs are uniquely qualified to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services to help refugees fully integrate beyond the first step of economic self-sufficiency. More importantly, MAAs have been recognized as an asset and vital in the resettling of refugees.