

**THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN BELONGS TO SUCH AS THESE**

Toolkit for Advocating for the Rights of Unaccompanied Children



# WELCOME!

## **Partner in Solidarity:**

The enclosed toolkit is designed to inspire you and call you to action in support of children and families fleeing extreme difficulties in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.

It is not designed to overwhelm you with a list of to-dos that you need to get done.

Rather you should peruse it as a list of suggested actions that you can lead or participate in with your community. You need not feel compelled to do all of these suggested activities. Even doing one of these actions is a big help and will start to build support behind the message of compassion, welcome and care that our faith community wishes to exhibit.

We encourage you to reach out to our staff member for assistance with any needs you may have.

For assistance please use the following contact persons:

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Those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community. This requires, at a minimum, that migrants have a right to claim refugee status without incarceration and to have their claims fully considered by a competent authority.

*Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, US-Mexican Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Migration, 2003

Let us be their neighbors, share their fears and uncertainty about the future, and take concrete steps to reduce their suffering.

Pope Francis speaking on World Refugee Day, June 20, 2014

COVER PHOTO SOURCE: PNUD El Salvador via Flickr

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# CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATION CRISIS: BACKGROUND

Since 2011, the number of unaccompanied immigrant children making the dangerous journey from Central America to the southern border of the United States has increased more than seven-fold, with arrivals potentially reaching as high as 90,000 children this year. Many these children, a growing share of whom are under the age of 12, are fleeing pervasive and targeted violence in their home countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

These countries, collectively known as the “Northern Triangle” of Central America are three of the most violent countries on the planet; Honduras has the highest murder rate in the world, with El Salvador and Guatemala ranking third and eighth respectively. Within these communities of diminishing police and judicial protections and escalating violence, children, single women, and single mother households with young children are the most vulnerable and are often prime targets for violence and exploitation by organized crime syndicates, gangs, and security forces.

In all three countries, gangs, transnational criminal organizations, and narco-traffickers commit acts of violence with near impunity, while local police forces are either unable or unwilling to offer protection to the public. In fact in many cases, particularly in Honduras and Guatemala, the police are also perpetrators of violence, either because they are in league with organized criminal groups or because they participate in “social-cleansing” campaigns in impoverished and violent neighborhoods. The U.S. State Department has advised that levels of violence are “critically high” in El Salvador and Honduras and warns of the inability of police to protect citizens.<sup>1</sup> The United States is not alone in experiencing an increase in migration from the Northern Triangle. Other countries in the region, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Costa Rica and Belize, have reported that asylum requests from Honduran, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran nationals are up 712% since 2008, reinforcing the sustained and regional nature of this forced migration crisis.

When children flee their homes they face many risks at the hands of traffickers, gangs, criminals, and public authorities along the journey. The unique vulnerabilities of children have long been recognized under U.S. and international law, which is why in 2002 the care of “unaccompanied alien children” (UAC) was moved from the Department of Homeland Security to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, within Health and Human Services.

The goal of the Unaccompanied Alien Children program, which served between 6,000-8,000 children a year before 2011, is to provide holistic, child-centered care for children arriving alone at U.S. borders. Once children cross the border, they are placed in the custody of ORR where the needs and the best interests of the children are assessed. On average, children remain in ORR custody for 30 days, before they are released to a family member or a foster family in the U.S. pending a determination of their best interests and status in immigration proceedings. A government adjudicator will determine whether a child should be returned to their country of origin or whether they qualify for immigration status as an asylee, victim of human trafficking, or under another form of humanitarian relief.

The crisis in Central America’s Northern Triangle, however, is not just about children but about adults and families as well who, experiencing the same violence and insecurity have fled their countries to seek safe haven elsewhere. In recent months, tens of thousands of women with children and other family units fleeing the pervasive violence of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have arrived in Texas and Arizona. In response to the increasing numbers of families arriving on our border, United States has prioritized rapidly deporting these family units from the Northern Triangle, subjecting newly arrived women and children to a process called “expedited removal,” effectively cutting off access to legal representation in the courts for many families. Further impeding the access these families have to due process is the U.S. decision to expand the use of family detention, a model abandoned in 2009 after general agreement that the practice was inhumane and unnecessary after reports of abuse and mismanagement of family detention centers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Accessed 7/27/14 U.S. Department of State “Honduras Travel Warning” 24 June 2014. Web 28 July 2014.  
<http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/alertswarnings/honduras-travel-warning.html>

<sup>2</sup> *Locking Up Family Values*, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, 2007 <http://lirs.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/RPTLOCKINGUPFAMILYVALUES2007.pdf>

## Central American Migration Crisis: Policy Proposals

There are many policy proposals in front of Congress that seek to address the rise in arrivals of Central American children and families at the Southern border of the United States. Some policy proposals stem from the incorrect assumption that the reason children are arriving in the U.S. is because of special protections due to unaccompanied children in the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 (TVPRA) of 2008. Some in Congress and the Administration therefore seek to repeal or weaken important provisions of the TVPRA in a way that would cut-off the ability of children who arrive in the U.S. without their parent or guardian to have their best interests determined with the help of a child welfare specialist by an immigration judge. In recognition of migrant children's vulnerabilities, the 2008 re-authorization of the TVPRA enhanced protections for unaccompanied minors and required requiring that each child arriving from noncontiguous countries be screened in an individualized and appropriate manner for trafficking and asylum-related concerns.

If changes to this law are pushed through Congress, however, children will lose their meaningful opportunity to have their story heard and apply for asylum, or be cared for by child welfare personnel as they pursue their protection claim. Instead, their fate could be decided by a border patrol officer or agent, and they could face deportation to life-threatening situations because they lacked sufficient time and opportunity to disclose their trauma or persecution to an adult they felt they could trust.

Giving a border patrol agent or officer sole discretion—without any judicial review—to decide whether a child fleeing harrowing circumstances should be allowed to seek protection in the U.S. immigration courts ignores the child's best interest and imperils U.S. obligations to not return refugees to their persecutors. This is the flawed process currently in place for Mexican children. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has urged Congress and the Administration to support legislation that will:

- **Ensure that the well-being of vulnerable children** is the driving force behind our policy response. Children should have access to child welfare personnel, legal counsel, and the services they need to navigate the immigration system. The TVPRA and other laws governing the protection and care for these children should not be changed and increases to family detention should be opposed.
- **Provide vital funding for refugee services in FY14.** The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within Health and Human Services is the office that provides lifesaving support services to resettled refugees, asylees, and survivors of human trafficking and torture. ORR is also responsible for providing care for unaccompanied immigrant children. The U.S. must show leadership by protecting unaccompanied children while maintaining our commitment to refugee resettlement and serving all of the populations within ORR's mandate.
- Address root causes of forced migration from the Northern Triangle. We cannot simply ignore the targeted violence and rampant insecurity compelling Hondurans, Guatemalans and Salvadorans to flee their homelands. In order to address this crisis at its source, the United States must listen to people who intimately understand how we arrived at this tragic juncture. Church organizations in Central America along with many others, have been calling on their governments to address impunity and corruption, improve judicial systems, expand educational access, strengthen—and in some cases build from scratch—child welfare services in the region, and support adequate return and reintegration programs to ensure that children who can safely remain in their home countries are able to do so.

To learn more about the conditions compelling people to flee the Northern Triangle, watch this [video](http://bit.ly/1snjs7o):  
<http://bit.ly/1snjs7o>

# HOW CAN YOU HELP RESPOND TO THE MIGRATION CRISIS?

## DONATE

In addition to taking action through this [Jesuit Conference/Jesuit Refugee Service USA alert](http://bit.ly/1rRDTvd) (<http://bit.ly/1rRDTvd>) in support of vulnerable Central American children, families, and other refugees, there are many ways to get involved through advocacy or by volunteering with our interfaith partners across the country.

Help the US Bishop's Migration and Refugee Services Foster Care program by making a tax-deductible contribution.

If you are in New York, Florida, or Washington, DC, make your donation [online](#).

Residents of other states should visit the [National Catholic Fund for Migration and Refugee Services](#).

## FOSTER CARE

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) department of Migrant and Refugee Services and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) are the two agencies in the United States that provide foster care services to unaccompanied refugee minors and unaccompanied alien children.

**Unaccompanied refugee minors (URM)** are individuals who are under age 18, entering the United States as a refugee unaccompanied by either a parent, an adult relative willing to serve as the child's guardian, or an otherwise legally qualified guardian.<sup>3</sup> As refugees, URM are legal immigrants admitted with appropriate documentation and having been thoroughly adjudicated by the Departments of State, Health and Human Services, and Homeland Security, as well as the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees.

**Unaccompanied alien children (UAC)** is a legal term defined by the Homeland Security Act of 2002 as “children who have no lawful immigration status in the United States; have not attained 18 years of age; have no parent or legal guardian in the United States; or no parent or legal guardian in the United States is available to provide care and physical custody.”<sup>4</sup> Central American children who have crossed the United States' southern border fall under this category although we prefer not to reference them by such dehumanizing language. Unlike unaccompanied refugee minors (URM), whose cases have already been adjudicated and who have already been determined to be refugees, children who are fleeing their home countries and seeking safety in the United States must navigate a complicated legal system to have their status determined. They have not yet been determined to be refugees or asylees, though many have legitimate claims to asylum and refugee protections.

For more information about foster care services for unaccompanied immigrant children:

- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: please call or email [migratingchildren@usccb.org](mailto:migratingchildren@usccb.org), 202-541-3081.
- [Foster Care for Unaccompanied Refugee & Immigrant Children: http://www.usccb.org/about/children-and-migration/upload/URM-FAQ-s.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/about/children-and-migration/upload/URM-FAQ-s.pdf)

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ilw.com/immigrationdaily/news/2008.0602-crs.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/who-we-serve-unaccompanied-alien-children>

# HOW CAN I ADVOCATE IN SOLIDARITY WITH CENTRAL AMERICAN REFUGEES?

## Visit your Representatives, Neighbor to Neighbor

*Why call them Neighbor-to-Neighbor visits?*

Bringing together a delegation of faith and community leaders to establish and nurture relationships with your senators and representatives is crucial for changing the “unjust structures” within our society. When members of Congress know their constituents care about refugees, family unity, humane enforcement, and immigrants’ rights, they vote accordingly. As both representatives and members of your communities, every senator and representative has an office – often multiple offices – in their home states. Visits to these offices are an impactful way to speak, neighbor to neighbor, with representatives and let them know why and how the laws and policies that affect refugees and immigrants impact your community.

## Purpose of Neighbor-to-Neighbor In-District Visits

1. To fulfill the promise of our baptismal covenant and “strive for justice and peace.” Neighbor-to-neighbor visits put faith into action by demanding that senators and representative understand that we, as constituents and people of faith, want to see compassionate and just immigration policies enacted.
2. To persuade your senators and representative to vote for policies that protect vulnerable people seeking peace and safety, prioritize family unity for all families, and provide a pathway to full citizenship for the undocumented members of our community.
3. To build relationships between people of faith and the public officials who make decisions that impact our communities.

It is helpful to meet with your senators and representative as often as you can. Educating your decision makers about the role your congregation and/or interfaith partnerships play in the strength and health of the community takes time, but these personal connections are capable of changing someone’s mind and stance on an issue, and are essential to making our communities more welcoming.

## Your Neighbor-to-Neighbor Visit: BEFORE THE VISIT

**Organize a team:** Before you meet with your senators and representative, get a team together. A team ideally includes faith leaders, service providers and/or people whose lives have been directly impacted by the immigration system. Be strategic in finding team members who best represent your community’s “ask”- are you meeting with your representative to discuss the care of unaccompanied immigrant children? Do you have anyone in your congregation or network with child welfare expertise or a personal story? If you are discussing the importance of immigration reform, can you share a story of how the broken immigration system has affected your community, or bring someone who can share that perspective? Talking services for refugees and/or immigrants? See if you can find a service provider to share their experiences. And don’t forget to engage community leaders who the senator or representative may already know and respect.

Building a team makes advocacy more sustainable, as you can commit as a group to ongoing outreach within your community and ongoing relationship building with your members of Congress. You might also think of including the

impacted communities in your area- recent immigrant communities or congregations and refugee communities – reach out and ask a leader or representative from those communities to join your team.

Aim for 5-10 participants for a visit, though a larger group can be a powerful sign of support for the issue. If you are considering bringing a larger group, check with the member's scheduler to see how many people the office can accommodate, and be sure your meeting is well-planned so that you are focused on your message and everyone knows their specific role.

2. **Find out who represents you in Congress and get to know your audience:** Go to

<http://capwiz.com/jesuit/dbq/officials/> to find out who your senators and representative are. Find out where they stand on the issue important to you, including past votes on pieces of refugee and immigration legislation that are important to you. Their websites and a quick Google search will show how they vote and what they have said, as well as biographical sketches, campaign statements, district demographics, occupation, religion, political and social memberships, areas of interest, and positions on other issues, all of which can inform your approach to the meeting. For specific bills, [www.thomas.loc.gov](http://www.thomas.loc.gov) is a good resource.

3. **Have a plan:** Meetings with decision makers should always be tied to your larger advocacy strategy, since meetings are just one of many activities important to creating more welcoming communities. Before you visit your members, always meet with the other participants to assign roles, including the facilitator, the personal story, specific issue points, and the "ask." Practice by role-playing before the day of your meeting so that everyone feels comfortable with their role and knows what to do. Review your talking points and prepare your materials. Consider bringing materials such as statements from specific faith groups and news clippings of relevant local events. It can be tempting to try and cover every piece of the immigration system important to your community but keep the message clear, concise and consistent. Remember this is the time to let your Representative or Senator know where your community stands in terms of the U.S. policy toward Central American children and families fleeing violence. You can always follow-up with the office to discuss related topics and share resources. After all, you are building this relationship meeting by meeting- so keep in touch with the office!

**Suggested Meeting Roles:**

**The Facilitator** will kick off the meeting by introducing your group, explaining the purpose for the meeting, and providing space for each person attending to briefly introduce themselves. Make sure each participant introduces which congregation and/or organization they represent. The facilitator will also jump in if the meeting goes off-track and redirect the conversation.

**The Personal Story** is key to every meeting. Someone should be present who can tell a compelling story about why you are committed to the U.S. offering an appropriate response to the current crisis in Central America while protecting children and families who have fled to our border. Telling this story will show how real peoples' lives are impacted and how your knowledge of the issues presented.

**Specific Issue Points:** There will be specific points your group will want to make about the policy proposals currently being considered by Congress. It will be helpful to have one person take on each of these issues to show they are distinctly important. Present a brief two minute reflection from a faith perspective on why preserving the rights of children and families seeking safe haven in the United States is an important issue for your community.

**The Ask** is the critical part of the visit when you ask, "Can we count on your support for \_\_\_\_\_ (children and families fleeing violence in Central America; responding with real solutions to the humanitarian crisis in Central America)?" Listen carefully and ask for clarification if what they say is vague.



**4. Schedule a meeting:** Call, email, or fax the local offices of your senators and representatives to request a meeting with the member to discuss immigration. Make sure to tell them how many other faith leaders and community members would like to attend with you. If the member is unavailable, ask to meet with a staffer who works on immigration issues. Be persistent and don't be discouraged if you need to follow-up in order to get a meeting scheduled.

### **Your Neighbor-to-Neighbor Visit: DURING THE VISIT**

Below is a suggested framework, but please adapt it to fit your team, your stories and your member of Congress.

**Introductions:** The Facilitator should start the meeting by thanking the member for their time, introducing the group as a whole, and then having each person introduce themselves.

People of faith throughout \_\_\_\_\_ (town/city/state) are committed to acting out our faith by being good neighbors to migrant and refugee families. We do this by \_\_\_\_\_ (Include a story of the work you or other faith groups in your community have done in support of refugees and immigrants – anything from ESL classes, to legal clinics, to days of prayer, to donations to diocese working on the southern border, to advocacy, to other ministries.)

We count you, Senator/Representative \_\_\_\_\_, as our neighbor, too. We commend you for demonstrating the hospitality of our community by \_\_\_\_\_ (Find some comments or legislation the member has worked on in support of immigrant and/or refugee communities.)

We'd also like to ask how you plan to be a good neighbor to immigrant workers and families going forward, especially as we respond to the humanitarian crisis in Central America and look to create a just and compassionate immigration system.

**Story:** Share a story demonstrating the harrowing circumstances compelling children and families to flee Central America

**Specific Issue Points:** Provide the member with the materials you prepared and explain specific issues, and statistics. Some suggested talking points on these issues are below:

**Humanitarian Principles:** We seek to preserve a proud American tradition of offering safe haven and welcome to people fleeing persecution and peril. We support policies that recognize the inherent dignity of every human being, keep humanitarian values at the center of our policies, and avoid over-reliance on detention.

Children who may be fleeing violence and seeking safety in the United States deserve to have a full and fair process to determine their reasons for migrating and their best interests as children. The wellbeing of vulnerable children must remain the driving force behind our policy response and this process must move at the speed of a child's trust, taking into account the trauma and victimization they have fled, rather than at the speed of political convenience. Children should have access to child welfare personnel, legal counsel, and the services they need to navigate the immigration system. The TVPRA and other laws governing the protection and care for unaccompanied children should not be changed and increases to family detention should be opposed.

**Make your ask:** We believe that in order to truly be good neighbors and true inheritors of our country's legacy of welcome for people forced from their homelands, we must welcome the refugee, the victim of trafficking, the child who has been abused or abandoned. Can we count on your support for \_\_\_\_\_? How can we best support you in our mutual goal?

**Listen well and take notes:** Much of advocacy involves listening, providing opportunities for the member to ask questions, looking for indications of the member's views, and finding opportunities to provide helpful information or correct misinformation. Members and staff will appreciate the chance to be heard instead of only being talked at. Ask questions and engage in conversation. Answer questions honestly. If you don't know the answer, say that you don't know but you will find out. Assign one person in the group to follow-up.

**Leave Behind Materials:** Bring with you educational information, policy recommendations, sign-on letters, charts, studies, faith resolutions, etc., all within a packet of resources to leave behind with the member's office. There are many helpful resources at the back of this toolkit.

**Thank you and invitation to a community event:** Thank you for your time and support. We will be hosting \_\_\_\_\_ (event, prayer vigil, etc). Can we count on your attendance? In the meantime, please let us know how we can be a support to you as we all come together in \_\_\_\_\_ (town/city/state) to be good neighbors and a welcoming community.

*Remember to get the contact information and cards for the staffers you meet. Consider asking the member and staff to take a photo with your group – most politicians love the photo op!*

### **Your Neighbor-to-Neighbor Visit: AFTER THE VISIT**

**Debrief your meeting:** It's important to make sure you are all on the same page immediately after leaving the meeting, while the conversation is fresh in your mind. Make sure to leave the office building so your debrief conversation can't be overheard. As a group, review: What did we hear? Did we get what we wanted? What are the next steps? Choose one person to send a follow-up email attaching the documents mentioned, providing answers to questions that came up during the meeting, and continuing to engage the member and staff in your group's work. It's also important to evaluate your group's work. How did we do as a team? Share the information learned during your meeting with your state coalition and other allies.

**Communicate with your base:** Make sure to take notes and report back how the meeting went to other groups with whom you are working with. The information from your meeting will inform your next steps on strategic action and is important for those who couldn't come to the meeting to feel included in the process.

**Follow up with your member of Congress:** Send the staff you met an email thanking them for their time, attaching any documents you mentioned, providing answers to questions that came up during the meeting, and restate your ask.

**Call Washington, DC:** Call the Interfaith Immigration call-in line at 1-866-940-2439 or the Capitol Switchboard at **(202) 224-3121** to be connected to the DC offices of your senators and representatives. Introduce yourself as a constituent and ask for the staffer who works on immigration. Tell them about your meeting with their local office, ask what they are doing to support and enact humane policies. Oftentimes the local and DC offices do not communicate about visits, so it's important to follow up with the DC office as well.

Our staff in DC and our interfaith partners can then follow up with the DC staff to reinforce your visit and to make sure we have an accurate understanding of where the Representative or Senator is on this issue!

# MAKING YOUR VOICE HEARD AT CANDIDATE EVENTS

In preparation for the November elections, candidates are campaigning in locations near you! Many campaign stops are open to the public and are a chance for members to hear directly from their constituents about the key issues before Congress. This election season, the humanitarian crisis at the southern border and unaccompanied immigrant children are likely to be a frequently discussed topic, as is immigration reform. Anti-immigrant groups will be present to make their case and confuse the two issues. We need to make sure that our elected officials hear LOUD and CLEAR that we, as Catholics, want to see a response to these children driven by compassion, justice and humanity. By asking questions about the treatment of children, conditions in Central America, or the detention of families we communicate with our elected officials about the values we share as a community, and the role we have to play as people of faith.

Follow these easy steps to get involved:

1. Call your Representative to ask when and where public campaign events will be held.
2. Invite other community members who care about unaccompanied children and the current crisis in Central America to attend with you. Make signs, wear t-shirts, and find creative ways to visually display that you are a person of faith who supports immigration reform.
3. Get there early and sit near microphones. Don't all sit together — it will help show that there is not just one group that supports immigration reform, but many from all over the community.
4. Prepare your question(s) ahead of time and write them down, in case they only take written questions. Have one or two key facts at your fingertips and include them when you ask your questions, along with a story about why you care or of someone who is impacted in your community. It can be tempting to want to cover every aspect of immigration reform or try and rebut other questions or comments that have been raised, but keep the message clear, concise and consistent. You can always follow-up with the office after the event.
5. Raise your hand to ask a question and keep your hand up until they give you time to speak. Find a way to be heard by cheering for others' questions, making a lot of noise in order for them to give you time to speak, and talking with the representative or their staff afterwards, and reemphasizing your point.

If you would like additional background materials, information on your representative's stance, or assistance formulating questions, please contact [saber@jesuits.org](mailto:saber@jesuits.org).

# INTRODUCING LOCAL RESOLUTIONS OF WELCOME IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Towns, cities and counties across the United States have already begun to come out with resolutions and statements of welcome, counteracting messages of fear and hatred which misrepresent the majority of communities in America. In mid-July the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and Santa Clara County each released resolutions and statements calling for a humanitarian response to increasing numbers of children and families fleeing Central America and arriving in the United States. Los Angeles and Columbia, South Carolina have followed suit. The Mayors of Lansing, Michigan, Syracuse, New York, and Atlanta Georgia have each championed statements of welcome after having heard from grassroots and faith-based groups in their cities.

## **How Can You Get Your Town, City, and County to Pass Similar Resolutions?**

In most towns, cities and localities throughout the United States, you can ask your city council, county commissioners, village board, or other governing body to pass a resolution. Here are some thoughts on how to prepare for such an action:

- 1) Prepare the resolution you want passed (see examples below).
- 2) Map out the members of the council or board, identify likely allies and ask to meet with them or use a public comment period to introduce the idea to the entire council.
- 3) Explain how the issue is not only of national concern, but also a local issue, and why a resolution of welcome and support for Central Americans fleeing violence is important to your community.
- 4) Show the elected official(s) the resolution you have prepared, and ask for their support. If they are supportive, ask whether they are willing to introduce the resolution, and also ask for their advice about the rest of the Council (they may be able to help you find other supporters and provide you with other valuable insights).
- 5) Collect signatures from local residents, members of your faith-community in support of the resolution, or ask them to send postcards, letters and emails to their elected officials.
- 6) Encourage your church or organization to make a public statement in support of the children and/or its commitment to delegating resources to help. Share these statements with council members.
- 7) When the day for the vote arrives, pack the meeting room with your supporters to put pressure on the officials to adopt the resolution. It can be helpful to have "credible" figures, such as faith leaders, lawyers, professors, or other refugees who have been resettled to your area present to speak in support.

## **Example: Santa Clara County Resolution in Support of Children and Families Fleeing Violence**

"Small children and refugees fleeing violence in their home countries require our support, not our acrimony. Where other communities may turn these needy children away, our community is ready and willing to be compassionate.

"We urge communities in the Bay Area, throughout the State of California, and across the nation to join us to make good on America's promise of fairness and due process.

"Under law, as a part of their deportation proceedings, every unaccompanied child is entitled to an evaluation to ascertain whether they are victims of human trafficking, have been abandoned or are eligible for asylum because of persecution. If not eligible, they will be returned home. But until this examination is complete, these children will remain in America where they must be treated humanely."

## **Example: Columbia, South Carolina City Council Passes a Resolution in Support of Refugee Children, Immigration Reform**

A RESOLUTION TO RESTATE THE FOUNDING PRINCIPLES OF COLUMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA, TO WELCOME UNACCOMPANIED IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE CHILDREN AND TO SUPPORT COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM



WHEREAS, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) reports that 350 children detained by immigration authorities were released to sponsors, typically relatives, in the State of South Carolina between January 1, 2014 and July 7, 2014 to be cared for while their immigration case is processed; and

WHEREAS, these 350 refugee children, who had no parent or guardian available to care for them when they were taken into custody, represent less than 1.2% of the 30,340 displaced children released to sponsor families across the nation; and

WHEREAS, displaced refugee children, like those placed in sponsor families in South Carolina, are often the most vulnerable among us having come to the United States fleeing violence, abuse or persecution in their home countries, as victims of human trafficking or simply seeking the opportunity to work hard and build a better life for themselves and their families; and

WHEREAS, the City of Columbia was founded in the spirit echoed in the words of Senator John Lewis Gervais who hoped "the oppressed of every land might find a refuge under the wings of Columbia"; and

WHEREAS, the City of Columbia believes that we have a duty to protect our children and provide for them and that to turn away a child in need, regardless of where he or she was born, is a violation not only of that spirit but of the fundamental principles of community and brotherhood upon which our city's foundations were built; and

WHEREAS, the City of Columbia further recognizes that the current influx of child refugees here and across the nation is only a symptom of a larger problem and that the only way to truly address the growing humanitarian crisis at our nation's southern border is to enact a comprehensive immigration reform plan that secures our borders, grows our economy and gives undocumented youth and their families the chance to earn their citizenship; NOW, THEREFORE,

BE IT RESOLVED by the Mayor and City Council of the City of Columbia, South Carolina on this 5th day of August, 2014 that we welcome every refugee child and unaccompanied immigrant child released to sponsors within our community by the Office of Refugee Resettlement and call on local, state and federal leaders to work together to address the current child refugee crisis by immediately adopting comprehensive immigration reform.

#### **Example: Local Activists Urge Passage of a Resolution of Welcome in Lansing, Michigan**

**Lansing, Mich. (WILX)** A local activist group used public comment Monday night to present the Lansing City Council with a resolution that would open the city's doors to immigrant children seeking asylum.

Action of Greater Lansing drafted a resolution and brought it to council members, asking them to adopt it. While the resolution may not be adopted in its current form, it's clear that a number of council members are in favor of the idea.

"I think I speak for the council when I say we are looking forward to if these children are placed in our community, embracing them and providing the support and the network for them to be nurtured and to thrive," said council vice president Judi Brown Clarke.

Fourth ward council member Jessica Yorko agreed that the council should send a message that Lansing is a welcoming community. "Many of us come from immigrant families from people that fled their country for one reason or another for a better future in the United States," she said. "I think stating our value as a welcoming city is an important thing for us to do."

Council President A'lynn Boles also seemed to signal her support for the idea Monday, though she scolded Action for taking its resolution to the media first, instead of bringing it to individual council members.

# WRITING AN OP-ED ON THE MIGRATION CRISIS

**Template:** Please edit into your own words and make personal connections to your own experience and family. Some newspaper guidelines will likely want op-eds to be a little longer and letters to be a little shorter. So please feel free to use this template to fit your newspaper's guidelines.

## ***What would you do to save a child?***

*(AS APPROPRIATE: In response to the article/op-ed/letter on DATE,) I believe it's critical that we understand why these children are coming. Families in Central America are experiencing record levels of violence. In Honduras alone, murders of women and girls have increased 346 percent since 2005. Our own State Department has warned not to travel to El Salvador or Honduras because "the police can't protect you".*

*In some cases, gangs control the police and forcibly recruit children into their ranks. Young girls are forced to be "girlfriends" of gang leaders, meaning they are repeatedly violated by all members of the gang. None of us may ever know first-hand the impossible choices these families have to make. I can't imagine choosing between my child's life being in imminent danger and the risk of sending her on a dangerous journey to safety. As Americans, we must have empathy and we must respond with compassion.*

*The very fact that parents send their children to another country for safety, despite knowing the dangers of the journey, demonstrates that the alternative - remaining in their country - is just not an option. It is also critical to note that children and families are fleeing not just to the United States. Nearby countries like Nicaragua and Belize have seen a 712 percent increase in people seeking asylum from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.*

*The U.S. has a moral and legal obligation to ensure we do not return these children back to harm. This means we have to care for them and provide opportunities for them to apply for asylum. And the U.S. must demand that their governments better protect these children and work with them to stop police and military corruption, safeguard women's shelters and witness protection programs, and release the holds that gangs have on communities by providing education and work opportunities for young people.*

*As Americans and [STATE connection Virginians/Californians/Nebraskans/etc.] in particular, we are people with great compassion, hospitality and generosity. When a child shows up on our doorstep seeking refuge from danger, whether one child or thousands, we must protect them in a way that reflects our highest values. Rather than judging situations that we cannot fathom, we must respond to the needs of these children in the way we would want someone to treat to our children if, God forbid, the situation were reversed.*

# SAMPLE LETTER TO CONGRESS

Dear Senator/ Representative \_\_\_\_\_,

As a person of faith and your constituent, I urge you to reject changes to the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPPRA) of 2008 and other policies that would remove lifesaving protections and services from vulnerable unaccompanied children.

An immediate response to this crisis is needed, but removing key protections from bipartisan legislation, especially at a time when more children are in need of these life-saving protections, is the wrong response. Legislative proposals such as the HUMANE Act (Helping Unaccompanied Minors and Alleviating National Emergency) do not offer appropriate humanitarian solutions to this crisis and do not address the systemic violence and instability that continues to force children to flee for their lives.

As both the House and the Senate consider the appropriate response to this crisis and the President's emergency supplemental appropriations request, I urge you to support legislation that will:

1. Ensure that the wellbeing of vulnerable children is the driving force behind our policy response. Children should not be treated as an enforcement priority but should have access to child welfare personnel, legal counsel, and the services they need to navigate the immigration system. The TVPPRA and other laws governing the protection and care for these children should not be changed and increases to family detention should be opposed.
2. Provide vital funding for refugee services in FY14. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within Health and Human Services is the office that provides lifesaving support services to resettled refugees, asylees, and survivors of human trafficking and torture. ORR is also responsible for providing care for unaccompanied children arriving in the U.S. The U.S. must show leadership by protecting unaccompanied children while maintaining our commitment to refugee resettlement and serving all of the populations within ORR's mandate.
3. Address Root Causes of forced migration from the Northern Triangle. We cannot simply ignore this aspect of the problem. In order to address this crisis at its source, the United States must listen to people who intimately understand how we arrived at this tragic juncture. Church organizations in Central America along with many others, have been calling on their governments to address impunity and corruption, improve judicial systems, expand educational access, strengthen—and in some cases build from scratch—child welfare services in the region, and support adequate return and reintegration programs to ensure that children who can safely remain in their home countries are able to do so.

The United States is capable of meeting this challenge with compassion and Episcopalians stand ready to work with Congress and the Administration in the implementation of humanitarian solutions to this crisis.

Thank you for your public service and please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Regards,

# WHY ARE PEOPLE FLEEING NOW?

Voices in Congress and the media have attempted to discredit the idea that violence in Central America is the key factor pushing hundreds of thousands of Central Americans from their homes. While it is true that Central America has struggled with endemic violence over the last decade, falsely conflating U.S. immigration policies with the current humanitarian crisis in Central America demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding about how displacement happens and evolves.

## Violence

1. Community leaders in both Honduras and El Salvador report gangs have grown more aggressive in recent months, instituting “join or die” policies <http://tpr.org/post/streets-honduras-look-what-driving-thousands-children-us> in some neighborhoods.
2. While 2011 was reported to be the peak year for the homicide rate in Honduras (a country that continues to hold the dubious distinction of having the highest murder rate in the world for four straight years) the rate of forced disappearances increased in 2013 (reported disappearances of women and girls increased by 281% in 2013 when compared to data from 2008: <http://www.cipamericas.org/archives/12582> ), leading analysts to conclude that the homicide rate may not have actually gone down but rather that victims’ bodies are being disposed of more discretely or that government data was being manipulated.
3. In El Salvador there was a 93% increase in forced disappearances <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/alertswarnings/el-salvador-travel-warning.html> in 2013 according to U.S. State Department.
4. In Honduras the youth murder rate has surged over the first 5 months of 2014, rising from an average of 70 children and youth killed per a month in 2010-2013 to an average of 90 children <http://www.laprensa.hn/sucesos/policiales/647527-96/reportan-muerte-violenta-de-270-hondure%C3%B1os-menores-de-23-a%C3%B1os> and youth killed per a month in 2014. May 2014 saw the heaviest death toll for children and youth with 102 murdered that month <http://hoy.com.do/mas-de-100-menores-de-23-anos-fueron-asesinados-en-honduras-en-mayo/>.
5. In Honduras from 2005 to 2012, murders of women and girls increased 346%. Murders of men and boys increased by 292% over the same time period.<sup>5</sup> [http://www.observatoriodeseguridadciudadanadelasmujeres.org/materiales/INFORME\\_VCM\\_C.A..pdf](http://www.observatoriodeseguridadciudadanadelasmujeres.org/materiales/INFORME_VCM_C.A..pdf)
6. “Although Salvadoran police statistics show a decrease in annual homicides during 2012 and 2013, the homicide rate has been rising steadily since August 2013,” U.S. State Department. <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/alertswarnings/el-salvador-travel-warning.html>

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<sup>5</sup> It bears mentioning that the murder rate according to uncorroborated government statistic dropped in 2013, so a recent analysis found the murder rate for women and girls rose 263% between 2005 and 2013. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=48241#.U9bCFvldXnJ> This perceived drop in the murder rate however may be attributable to the dramatic 281% increase <http://www.cipamericas.org/archives/12582> in forced disappearances of women and girls over the last five years in Honduras.



7. 130,000 people were displaced one or more times in El Salvador in 2012 alone in a country of roughly 6 million people <http://rsq.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2014/06/10/rsq.hdu008.full.pdf+html>

## Impunity

1. Impunity also appears to be on the rise in the region. Over the past three years, 48,947 people were murdered in the Northern Triangle, the most violent region of the world. Countries achieved convictions in 2,295 of those homicide cases, representing a regional impunity rate of 95 percent for homicides over that three year period. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/the-northern-triangle-the-countries-that-dont-cry-for-their-dead>
2. Only 20 of every 100 murders are ever investigated in Honduras according to official data of the Honduran Public Ministry. <https://news.vice.com/article/honduras-is-combating-its-homicide-epidemic-with-militarization>

## Complicity and Corruption within the Government

1. In September 2013, a new law gave the military full policing powers in Honduras, despite objections from the nation's Human Rights Ombudsman who called the move clearly unconstitutional <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/09/military-given-full-powers-to-fight-crime-in-honduras/> . Women's groups in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa where the police were illegally militarized a year before have reported soaring levels of sexual assault and violence against women after the military police take over. <http://www.cipamericas.org/archives/12582>
2. Since July 2011 the government of Honduras has refused to share its homicide <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/the-northern-triangle-the-countries-that-dont-cry-for-their-dead> data with the independent analysts at the Violence Observatory at the National Autonomous University of Honduras or any other independent group, leading to allegations that the government may be manipulating crime data.
3. In Honduras the police are deeply penetrated by organized crime. A Feb. 2014 report by the leading newspaper "El Herald" found that over 200 national police were implicated in killings for hire, drug theft, and corruption. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/the-northern-triangle-the-countries-that-dont-cry-for-their-dead>
4. In Honduras, there are substantiated reports <http://www.elheraldo.hn/csp/mediapool/sites/ElHeraldo/Sucesos/story.csp?cid=621908&sid=293&fid=219> of police forming and participating in death squads and committing extra-judicial executions in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa.

## Why are people fleeing "now"?

- Although 2011 may have been the peak year for reported homicides in Honduras, the number of disappearances has risen significantly, suggesting that the homicide rate may not have actually gone down but rather that some victims' bodies are being hidden rather than displayed. El Salvador has similarly seen a rise in disappearances.
- While murder rates for adults have decreased slightly in the region, murder rates for children and youths has risen significantly. In Honduras the youth murder rate has surged over the first 5 months of 2014, rising from an average of 70 children and youth killed per a month in 2010-2013 to an average of 90 per month in 2014.

- There are no effective witness protection systems in these countries. Those who witness or are victims of a crime are often left no choice but to relocate or risk being targeted long before the case gets to trial, if it is even investigated at all.
- In Honduras, there are substantiated reports of police forming and participating in death squads and committing extra-judicial executions in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa; a recent investigation found that over 200 national police in Honduras were implicated in killings for hire, drug theft, and corruption.
- Impunity is widespread in the region. The conviction rate for murders in all three countries hovers at about 5%.

## **What are the push factors? What about pull factors in the U.S.?**

- Even if violence was not continuing to worsen, a lag between the spike in violence and the largest numbers of children, families and asylum-seekers fleeing is a typical pattern for displacement in conflict zones.
- People often try to relocate in-country when they're first threatened. But eventually people discover that no matter how many times they move within the country—to a new neighborhood or a new city—they aren't safe, and so many of them flee outside the region. This is very similar to patterns of internal and then external displacement that we see in other conflict zones around the world.
- Similarly, people may not flee at the first horrific act of violence in their neighborhood, but after they've seen a classmate and a family member and a neighbor all murdered, and have seen the police fail to investigate all three—or worse, recognized the police as being in active collusion with the perpetrators—they come to understand that their government has been compromised and that it cannot or will not protect them.
- UNHCR reports that other stable countries in the region, such as Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Costa Rica and Belize have reported that asylum requests from Honduran, Guatemalan, and Salvadorian nationals have risen 712% since 2008. These countries do not have the TVPRA of 2008 or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or other policies that some in the U.S. have incorrectly identified as “magnets” for Central American migration
- If this migration were based solely in “pull factors,” more Nicaraguan children, living in the poorest country in the region, would be fleeing to the United States in numbers similar to Honduran, Salvadorian, and Guatemalan children. Instead, over 75% of children fleeing to the United States are fleeing Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala

## **How should the U.S. respond?**

- This is an emergency situation that requires an emergency response. A clean supplemental is the appropriate means to address the emergency funding
- Protections for children are in place because providing safety for children is a recognized national priority and humanitarian imperative. We cannot turn our backs on vulnerable children and our American ideals simply because a large number of children need protection
- Extremely vulnerable children must receive child appropriate services and care when they arrive at our borders seeking refuge, but that care should not come at the expense of other vulnerable populations of concern to whom the United States has pledged protection and support.
- Cuts to refugee services hurt refugees already here and the communities that welcome them, impeding their ability to obtain education, employment, and stability. Cuts to refugee funding hurt refugees abroad living in camp or other displacement situations who have already been approved for resettlement, passed security and medical checks, and are waiting to depart to begin their lives anew in the United States.

- We cannot enforce our way out of this crisis, and rolling back protections for vulnerable people will do nothing to address the violence that compels them to flee
- Due process is imperative and those eligible for refugee protections, or a related status, must be afforded their chance to have their case heard through an individualized assessment.
- We should not respond to this crisis by increasing the detention of children and families seeking protection or decreasing due process protections for migrants. Denying refugee and trafficked children fair and meaningful access to protection is in direct contradiction to our responsibility and global leadership for protecting the most vulnerable.
- The world is watching our response to this crisis. How can we ask partners in Turkey, Jordan and elsewhere to continue to accept increasing numbers of vulnerable people while we restrict access to protection at ours? Other nations in Central America are receiving increasing numbers of asylum seekers from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, and will follow our example.
- This problem will not be fixed with more boots on our border or drones in our sky. It is a humanitarian crisis that must be addressed at the source. By partnering with governments and civil society in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador to build safe and resilient communities, address impunity and corruption, strengthen the independence of judicial systems, and investing in violence prevention and interruption programs we can help to solve this crisis.

**For more in-depth and comprehensive recommendations, see: <http://bit.ly/1pB8PwN>**

**Holding an event or preparing for an advocacy action? Brush up on the evolution of the crisis in Central America by watching this short video: [http://youtu.be/v\\_sa0-6uEiU](http://youtu.be/v_sa0-6uEiU)**

# MYTHS & FACTS

**Myth 1:** President Obama has been lax on Border Security and enforcement of immigration laws, which is driving increases in Central American youth and families migration to the United States

**Fact:** Border enforcement has never been tougher or more robustly funded.

- Prosecutions for “illegal entry” have risen by 130% since 2007.
- The administration is spending \$18 billion on border enforcement.
- There are now more than 21,000 Border Patrol agents. The number of Border Patrol agents has doubled since 2005 and quintupled since 1993.
- We now have drones and Blackhawk helicopters on the border, 700 miles of fencing and this administration has deported approximately 400,000 people a year.

**Fact:** Crime and violence is driving increased migration from Central America.

- Migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America—El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras—has risen steadily as violence increases and transnational organized crime has gained a foothold.
- Honduras has the highest homicide rate in world. From 2005 to 2012, murders of women and girls increased 346%. Murders of men and boys increased by 292% over the same time period.<sup>6</sup>
- Since 2006, the total number of murders in Honduras has more than doubled, rising from 3,118 to 7,172 in 2012. Over that same period the number of Hondurans migrating illegally to the U.S. has increased by 73%.
- Child advocates, especially from Honduras and El Salvador, report accounts of children being forcibly recruited to participate in gang activities.
- Governments in the region have been unable to prevent violence and ensure citizen safety. Beginning in 2003, governments in Central America implemented “iron fist” (*mano dura*) policing strategies; but homicide rates rose as those policies were implemented. Many young people in poor neighborhoods where gangs are active have no other option but to flee home.
- Organized criminal networks have become more involved in the drug trade, and in some cases have penetrated the political sector. Conflicts between trafficking groups, and corruption that weakens the ability of the police and other officials to respond to crime, have led to violence along smuggling routes.

**Fact:** Lack of opportunity leads many young people to migrate.

- The decision to leave your home and community involves many factors. Extreme criminality may be driving the recent surge of youth migration, but the high levels violence and insecurity stem from and are compounded by deeply entrenched poverty. Improving policing can stem violence, but creating opportunity for youth employment is essential to sustaining lower levels of violence.
- According to a 2012 World Bank study younger workers confront serious barriers to legal employment. The study found that 30% of urban youth in Central America are neither working nor in school. Allocating a fraction

<sup>6</sup> This statistic is from the Observatory of Citizen Security’s [2012 report](#) on violence against women in Central America. It bears mentioning that the murder rate according to uncorroborated government statistic dropped in 2013, so a recent analysis found the murder rate for women and girls rose [263% between 2005 and 2013](#). This perceived drop in the murder rate however should be analyzed in light of the dramatic increase [in forced disappearances](#) of women and girls in Honduras in 2013.



of border security funds to sustainable economic and human development for Central America would be a wise investment.

**Myth 2:** The Obama administration's policy of "paroling" unaccompanied children apprehended by Border Patrol to family members has led parents to traffic their children to the United States.

**Fact:** The number of unaccompanied children crossing the border has doubled every year since 2011, largely due to the **extreme levels of violence** facing young people who live in impoverished communities in Central America.

- Children and youth in Central America are particularly vulnerable to violence both by gangs attempting to forcibly recruit children as young as five into their ranks, and from vigilante death squads who enter neighborhoods known for gang activity and indiscriminately execute young people.

**Fact:** Increases in youth migration to the United States from Honduras is driven by a high level of victimization.

- Honduran boys and men ages 15 to 30 have a 1 in 300 chance of being murdered.
- Each month for the last 3 years about 70 children and youth in Honduras have been murdered. From January to March of this year, the number of murders of children and youth 23 and under rose to 90 a month on average.
- The tortured bodies of children ranging in ages between 2 and 13 have appeared in certain gang controlled neighborhoods in the cities of San Pedro Sula and Limon in Honduras, apparently victims of forced recruitment campaigns.
- The children arriving on our border suffer serious hardship during extremely dangerous journeys to escape targeted violence from which regional governments have failed to protect them.

**Myth 3:** The increase in asylum applications from Central Americans is a sign of fraud in the asylum system. Illegal migrants are taking advantage of American generosity to get into the U.S.

**Fact:** People fleeing the violence in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala are claiming asylum in many other countries.

- Asylum claims are increasing all over the region, indicating that the cause of the increase is not unique to the U.S.
- Since 2009, Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Belize jointly documented a 712% increase in the number of asylum applications from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.

**Fact:** The increase in asylum claims is being driven by an increase in violence, criminality, impunity and corruption in the precarious states of the Northern Triangle.

- We can't ask countries like Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon to keep their borders open in the face of surging numbers of people seeking protection from violence in Syria if we're unwilling to objectively screen the asylum claims of desperate people who arrive at our own border. As a global humanitarian leader, the U.S. has an obligation to objectively assess applications for refugee status. The current increase in asylum claims may be an indication of an increase in people seeking protection from violence, not of people trying to "game" the system.

# INTERFAITH LETTER TO CONGRESS ON HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

July 24, 2014

Dear Mr. President and Members of Congress,

Our faith traditions challenge us to welcome the immigrant through scriptures such as Leviticus 19:34, *“The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born.”* Many of our organizations are living out this command by working tirelessly in bus stations and shelters to assist vulnerable children and families coming from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador and in ministries dedicated to human rights and sustainable development in the Northern Triangle.<sup>7</sup>

While we appreciate the U.S. government's attention to the humanitarian crisis faced by migrants from Central America, we strongly object to proposals to detain families with children and to any move to roll back the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPA) in order to effect expeditious deportations. Forcibly and hurriedly returning people in need of international protection back to the dangerous situations they fled without adequate due process would undermine our obligations under international law and our position as a global humanitarian leader and would be a moral disgrace.

As we read through the Administration's supplemental appropriations request, we are pleased to see an increase in funding for the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), as increased funding is needed so that ORR can adequately serve both unaccompanied children and refugees. However, we urge Congress to provide more funds in the supplemental to increase legal services for unaccompanied children in the United States and enhance programs to reduce violence in sending countries so that individuals, particularly children and families, are not forced to undertake dangerous journeys in the first place. We are also deeply concerned about language in the supplemental request that would discourage persecuted individuals in Central America from seeking asylum and protection, and that would expand the detention of children and families without addressing the unacceptable conditions of these facilities. Additionally, we oppose any proposals that would restrict these children's access to life-saving protection or return them to unsafe situations in which they could be further exploited.

**This is a regional humanitarian crisis, not a U.S. immigration enforcement problem.** Since 2009 asylum requests by Hondurans, Salvadorans and Guatemalans seeking refuge in Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Belize have increased sharply. In fact, compared to 2008, UNHCR registered a 712% increase in the number of asylum applications in the region in 2013.<sup>8</sup> Many of the Central Americans arriving in the United States today are people primarily fleeing violence. The current crisis thus demands both a humanitarian response in the short-term and, in the long-term, policies to address complex root causes.

The message to parents not to let their children make this dangerous journey fails to account for the truly desperate situations facing many children and families. No parent sends their child into danger unless they feel they have no choice. The U.S. State Department currently has travel advisories in effect for Honduras and El Salvador, warning that the level of crime and violence remains critically high and noting that, “criminals operate with a high degree of impunity throughout Honduras.”<sup>9</sup>

Our country regularly pleads with governments of countries in other parts of the world to keep their borders, hospitals, and schools accessible for refugees fleeing violence and persecution.<sup>10</sup> Thus far this fiscal year, unaccompanied children represent less than 0.02 percent of our population (by comparison, refugees from Syria now make up 20 percent of the population in Lebanon). When the U.S. is faced with a mixed migration flow that includes many refugees and others in

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<sup>7</sup> El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras

<sup>8</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “*Children on the Run*” [unhcrwashington.org/children](http://unhcrwashington.org/children), July 2, 2014

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, Travel Warnings, July 2014. [travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/alertswarnings.html](http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/alertswarnings.html)

<sup>10</sup> Anne C. Richard, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, U.S. Department of State. Statement to the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights, January 2014. [www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/remarks/2014/219388.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/remarks/2014/219388.htm).

need of humanitarian relief, we must not renege on our moral and legal obligations to protect those fleeing for their lives.

**We respectfully ask that you consider the steps below to address the needs of Central Americans fleeing harm in a just, effective, compassionate, and comprehensive manner:**

**Strengthen the humanitarian response in the United States.** The U.S. must embrace its moral and legal obligations to asylum-seekers, many of which are women and children, who have arrived at our borders seeking protection. A policy of “sealing” borders and housing vulnerable people in jail-like conditions will not dissuade people who are fleeing for their lives and seeking safety. These policies instead risk driving desperate people into even more dangerous circumstances and inflicting more pain upon those already suffering.

**Process women, children and asylum-seekers humanely**

- **Strengthen community-based alternatives to detention programs, which are cost effective and humane.** We are thankful for the current partnership between FEMA/ORR and faith-based agencies in responding to this humanitarian crisis. We suggest redirecting resources slated for family detention to aid and assist this collaboration. Rather than the 6,000 detention beds called for in the Administration's Supplemental Request, we urge Congress to provide funds to alternatives to detention. We further reject the use of electronic shackles for children.
- **Seek alternatives to a failed policy of family detention.** Unnecessary detention often bars bona fide refugees and others from accessing the few pro bono legal services that are available. The T. Don Hutto detention facility for families was a national embarrassment. Thankfully, the Administration closed this facility in 2009, ending its legacy of inhumane treatment of women and children.<sup>11</sup> There is no guarantee that this renewed effort to incarcerate families will not have the same outcome. While we do not support family detention, we believe that where it exists, you have an obligation to allow community organizations access to facilities to monitor the conditions inside, and to allow religious services and visitation.
- **Leave intact the provisions of the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 relating to unaccompanied children.** Our organizations are deeply troubled by the implication that the Administration and some members of Congress are considering removing children more quickly and less safely than is required by current law. We have long been concerned about the adequacy of screenings for children from contiguous countries in ensuring that they will not face trafficking, persecution or harm if returned quickly, including children from Mexico who are often summarily returned to harm. Traumatized children, some as young as four years old, often will not divulge complex details of threats and violence during a first meeting with strangers, and are even less likely to do so in the presence of armed strangers in uniform. The U.S. should be working to ensure the best interests and safety of children is paramount rather than curtailing existing protections. No child, including children from Mexico, should be deported without adequate screenings for trafficking and protection needs to ensure they can be returned safely and not placed back into the hands of traffickers and others who will exploit them. Proposals that would roll back protections for children from Central America or treat them as Mexican children are treated currently, should be rejected. Independent child welfare, legal and anti-trafficking experts should have access to unaccompanied children to assist in the identification, screening, and referrals of potential child asylum applicants, trafficking victims and potential child-trafficking victims. For the short time children are in CBP custody, they should receive adequate nutrition, housing, and medical treatment.
- **Provide counsel to all unaccompanied children.** In addition to the legal protections provided to children in current law, each child should be provided with legal counsel and guaranteed that his/her case will be evaluated in-person by an immigration judge with sufficient time for a determination of the best interest of the child and

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<sup>11</sup> *Landmark Settlement Announced in Federal Lawsuit Challenging Conditions at Immigrant Detention Center in Texas*, ACLU, August 2007. [www.aclu.org/immigrants-rights-prisoners-rights/landmark-settlement-announced-federal-lawsuit-challenging](http://www.aclu.org/immigrants-rights-prisoners-rights/landmark-settlement-announced-federal-lawsuit-challenging).

his/her eligibility for relief under current U.S. law. While the Administration's request includes some funds for legal orientation programs and an increased number of immigration judges, it does not go far enough. We urge Congress to provide additional funds to ensure these children have access to legal assistance and a chance to have their stories heard in a timely manner.

- **Improve oversight of the asylum screening process** to ensure that all individuals are asked if they fear return to their country of origin and are referred to the asylum process if needed. In particular, unaccompanied children from Mexico are entitled to less due process in asylum screening than adults or other unaccompanied children. They, too, should be screened for asylum protections by a child welfare and asylum expert.
- **Provide unaccompanied children with adequate services, while maintaining services for other groups under the care of the Office of Refugee Resettlement.** The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), the agency responsible for the care of unaccompanied immigrant children, has addressed the budget shortfall resulting from the child migrant emergency by reprogramming money destined for services for resettled refugees. Supplemental funding is needed to adequately address the unexpected child migration crisis while maintaining commitments to rescuing and resettling refugees in distress abroad. In addition to supplemental funds urgently needed this year, ORR will require additional funding in the coming year to respond to this crisis without sacrificing other refugee services. We support the Administration's supplemental request for ORR in Fiscal Year 2014, and urge Congress to provide these important funds.

**The U.S. response to the current crisis must also address root causes.** Too often we settle for quick and at times harmful “fixes,” treating the proverbial symptoms rather than the underlying causes. There are several steps U.S. policymakers can take to improve conditions for would-be migrants in Central America, making it possible for people to find safety and prosperity in their home communities. However, these efforts must be adequately resourced; we were disappointed to see that only 8% of the Administration's supplemental request is directed toward addressing root causes.

#### **Address poverty and lack of opportunity in Central America**

- **Increase investments in sustainable development**, such as education, job training, job creation, cooperative businesses, small-scale agriculture, and environmental care, such as planting trees and community gardens.
- **Adjust trade agreements** (both enacted and proposed) to better ensure respect for human and labor rights as well as environmental standards. Modify or revoke agreements that negatively impact livelihoods and rural economies and lead to increased poverty and migration.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Address violence and child and crime victim protection systems**

- **Increase investment in community-based youth violence prevention programs.** Programs such as Cure Violence<sup>13</sup> and the Paso y Paso social education program in Honduras, the Puente Belice Program in Guatemala, and Youth Builders<sup>14</sup> in El Salvador can effectively address the culture of violence in cities struggling with some of the highest levels of violence in the world.<sup>15</sup> Investment should include nonviolent conflict intervention programs and employ restorative justice models. For instance, taking a public health approach to violence is helpful for reducing rather than merely displacing violence.
- **Reduce reliance on militarized and armed approaches to the prevention of violence.** A militarized approach to gangs, border security, and drug policy often contributes to violence and distrust in communities and leads to

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<sup>12</sup> *Illegal Immigration and NAFTA*, Dustin Ensinger, February 2011. [economyincrisis.org/content/illegal-immigration-and-nafta](http://economyincrisis.org/content/illegal-immigration-and-nafta).

<sup>13</sup> Cure the Violence. [www.cureviolence.org](http://www.cureviolence.org). They focus on directly reducing shootings and homicides.

<sup>14</sup> *El Salvador*, Catholic Relief Services. [crs.org/countries/el-salvador](http://crs.org/countries/el-salvador).

<sup>15</sup> Evaluations show declines in homicides and gang crimes in Los Angeles over four years. Santa Tecla, El Salvador, where a program started in 2003, now has a 40% lower homicide rate compared with surrounding communities.

egregious human rights violations. Instead, the U.S. should focus on strengthening judicial independence, the capacity of prosecutors to independently investigate police and military abuses, and the ability of civil society to hold government actors accountable for corruption and abuse.

- **Provide resources and technical assistance for shelters, particularly for girls and women fleeing violence, and for effective witness protection programs.** These investments will allow witnesses and crime victims to participate in justice processes while staying in their countries of origin and can help reduce impunity over time.
- **Support well-trained, well-resourced and accountable child protection systems in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.** The three countries currently have inadequate or not-yet-functioning (in the case of Honduras) child welfare systems. It is critical to have accountable and adequately staffed and resourced child protection systems to protect children at risk of violence and abuse and these agencies must be in place and prepared to receive returned children before any child is removed. For those children deemed ineligible for humanitarian relief and only after child welfare systems are adequate to the task of receiving such individuals, the U.S. should invest in strengthening return and reintegration programs for deported children. Such programs should be implemented in all cases in which a child is being returned to his/her home country to ensure that the placement is safe, permanent and in the child's best interests. Follow-up social services and monitoring should be provided in countries of origin by civil society social service providers when an unaccompanied child is repatriated, with outcomes that are tracked. This approach should both facilitate safe and healthy reintegration, and strengthen accountability for the welfare of deported children.

As faith based organizations, we are called to “love the stranger” and “welcome the stranger”. We urgently appeal to all people of faith, to our leaders in Congress, and to you, President Obama, to respond to this humanitarian crisis with mercy, compassion, love and hospitality.

Sincerely,

CC: Jeh Johnson, Secretary, U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
John Kerry, Secretary, U.S. Department of State

## National Organizations Signatories

8th Day Center for Justice  
African American Ministers In Action  
Alliance of Baptists  
American Baptist Churches USA  
American Baptist Home Mission Societies  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
Church World Service  
Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach  
Conference of Major Superiors of Men  
Disciples of Christ, Week of Compassion  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
Franciscan Action Network  
Friends Committee on National Legislation  
Ignatian Solidarity Network  
Jesuit Conference of the United States  
Jesuit Refugee Service/USA  
Joint Immigration Venture  
Latin America Working Group  
Leadership Conference of Women Religious  
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service  
Marianist Province of the U.S.  
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns  
Mennonite Central Committee, U.S. Washington Office  
Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate JPIC office  
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd  
National Council of Churches, USA

National Council of Jewish Women  
National Farm Worker Ministry  
NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby  
Pax Christi USA  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas  
The American Friends Service Committee  
The Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America  
The Episcopal Church  
The Episcopal Network for Economic Justice  
The Leadership Team of the Daughters of Charity, Province of St. Louise  
The Presbyterian Peace Fellowship  
The United Church of Christ  
The United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries  
Unitarian Universalist Association

### Regional/State/Local Organization Signatories

1st Christian Church, (Disciples of Christ) - Lincoln, NE  
Abbey of New Clairvaux - Vina, CA  
Adorers of the Blood of Christ - Saint Louis, MO  
Advocacy for Justice and Peace Committee of the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia – Brookhaven, PA  
Agricultural Missions, Inc - New York, NY  
Always Our Children, Diamond Bar, CA - Diamond Bar, CA  
Associate of the Srs of St Francis of Penance and Christian Charity - Carmichael, CA  
Atlantic-Midwest Provincial Council of the School Sisters of Notre Dame - Baltimore, MD

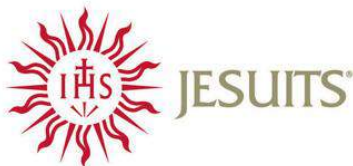
Augustinians - Villanova, PA  
 Baltimore Jewish Council - Pikesville, MD  
 Benedictine Sisters of Chicago - Chicago, IL  
 Benedictines For Peace - Bakerstown, PA  
 BEOC - Brockport, NY  
 Bloomington Inclusive Eucharist Community - Bloomington, IN  
 Boston New Sanctuary Movement - Boston, MA  
 Boulevard Congregational and Christian Church - Lawton, OK  
 Brothers of St. Francis Xavier - Baltimore, MD  
 California Province of the Society of Jesus - San Jose, CA  
 Call to Action - NOLA - New Orleans, LA  
 CallToAction of NW Ohio - Toledo, OH  
 CallToAction of NW Ohio - Toledo, OH  
 Catholic church - Rochester, MN  
 CCCA - Silver Spring, MD  
 Center for Active Nonviolence and Peacemaking - Clinton, IA  
 Central Pacific Provincial Council of the School Sisters of Notre Dame - St. Louis, MO  
 Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) - Hedrick, IA  
 Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) - Topeka, KS  
 Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) - Columbia, SC  
 Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Kansas - Topeka, KS  
 Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) In Kentucky - Lexington, KY  
 Christian Church Disciples of Christ - Sunnyvale, CA  
 Christian Church in Illinois and Wisconsin - Bloomington, IL  
 Christian Reformed Church in North America - Grand Rapids, MI  
 Church and Society Committee, Nevada City United Methodist Church - Grass Valley, CA  
 Congregation of Saint Joseph - Cleveland, OH  
 Congregation of Sisters of Saint Joseph - Wheeling, WV  
 Congregation of Sisters of St. Joseph - Wheeling, WV  
 Congregation of Srs. of I.H.M. - Scranton, PA  
 Congregation of St. Joseph - La Grange Park, IL  
 Congregation of St. Joseph - Tipton, IN  
 Congregation of St. Joseph - Wichita, KS  
 Congregation of St. Joseph - Cincinnati, OH  
 Congregation of St. Joseph - Wheeling, WV  
 Congregation of St. Joseph Peace and Justice Team - Cleveland, OH  
 Congregation of the Mission, Western Province, Peace and Justice - New Orleans, LA  
 Congregation of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary - Scranton, PA  
 Crossing Borders - Dubuque - Dubuque, IA  
 CTA of So. Cal - Long Beach, CA  
 Daughters of Charity, Province of the West - Los Altos, CA  
 Daughters of Wisdom - Islip, NY  
 Dignity Health - Paradise Valley, AZ  
 Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago - Chicago, IL  
 Disciples of Christ - Ottumwa, IA  
 Disciples of Christ - South Bend, IN  
 Disciples of Christ - San Antonio, TX  
 Disciples of Christ - McKinney, TX  
 Dominican Sisters in Committed Collaboration - Blauvelt, NY  
 Dominican Sisters of Hope - Ossining, NY  
 Dominican Sisters of Hosuton - Houston, TX  
 Dominican Sisters of San Rafael - Stockton, CA  
 Dominican Sisters of San Rafael, CA - Richmond, CA  
 Dominican Sisters - Sparkill - Sparkill, NY  
 El Pueblo - Biloxi, MS  
 Emmanuel Mennonite Church - Gainesville, FL  
 Esther's Well Restoration Homes - Providence, RI  
 Farmworker Association of Florida - Apopka, FL  
 First Christian Church - Dunlap, IL  
 First Christian Church - Rensselaer, IN  
 First Christian Church - Shawnee, OK  
 First Christian Church - Norman, OK  
 First Christian Church - Carrollton, TX  
 First Christian Church - Garland, TX  
 First Christian Church - Falls Church, VA  
 First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) - Signal Mountain, TN  
 First Christian Church Carrollton - Irving, TX  
 First Christian Church Des Moines IA - Des Moines, IA  
 First Christian Church Disciples of Christ - Hannibal, MO  
 First Christian Church in Creve Coeur, IL - Eureka, IL  
 First Christian Church of Puyallup - Puyallup, WA  
 First Christian Church, Charlotte NC - Charlotte, NC  
 First Christian Church, Covington, Kentucky - Covington, KY  
 First Christian Church, Pineville LA - Pineville, LA  
 First Christian, DOC - Lawrenceburg, KY  
 First Metropolitan Community Church - Atlanta, GA  
 Florida Council of Churches - Tampa, FL  
 Florida Council of Churches - Tampa, FL  
 Florida Immigrant Coalition, Inc. (FLIC) - Miami, FL  
 Franciscan Friars (OFM), St. John the Baptist Province, JPIC Office - Cincinnati, OH  
 Franciscan Friars, TOR, Immaculate Conception Province - Hollidaysburg, PA  
 Franciscan Sisters Leadership Team - Little Falls, MN  
 Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls Justice Commission - Little Falls, MN  
 Franciscan Sisters of the Poor - Cincinnati, OH  
 Franciscans for Justice - Sacramento, CA  
 Free Spirit Inclusive Catholic Community - Greenville, NC  
 Frist Christian Church - Owensboro, KY  
 Glenmary Home Missioners - Nashville, TN  
 Good Shepherd Inclusive Catholic Community - Fort Myers, FL  
 Gwendolyn Simmons - Gainesville, FL  
 Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus - Athens, GA  
 Holy Cross Ministries - Salt Lake City, UT  
 Holy Rosary Priory, Houston, TX - Houston, TX  
 Holy Wisdom Catholic Community - Long Beach, CA  
 Hope Community Center/Notre Dame Americorps - Apopka, FL  
 HourChildren - Astoria, NY  
 Ignatius Chapel Community, Loyola University of New Orleans - New Orleans, LA  
 Immaculate Conception Catholic Church - Baton Rouge, LA  
 Immaculate Heart Community - Los Angeles, CA  
 Immigration Action Team, Unity Temple Unitarian Universalist Congregation - Aurora, IL  
 Immigration Family Support Network - Wichita, KS  
 Intercommunity Center for Justice and Peace - Cincinnati, OH  
 Interfaith Alliance for Immigrant Justice - Gainesville, FL  
 Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice - Ann Arbor, MI  
 Interfaith Movement for Immigrant Justice - Portland, OR  
 Jesuits of the New Orleans Province - New Orleans, LA  
 Jewish Family & Children's Service Pittsburgh PA - Pittsburgh, PA  
 Johns Creek Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) - Duluth, GA  
 JPIC Network, Sisters of St. Francis Sylvania, OH - Sylvania, OH  
 JPIC Office, Ursuline Sisters - New Rochelle, NY  
 Justice & Peace Committee Sisters of St. Joseph of Chambers US Province - West Hartford, CT  
 Justice and Peace - Springfield, IL  
 Lakewood Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) - Waco, TX  
 Lay Dominican Order, Chapter of the Blessed Sacrament - Farmington Mills, MI  
 Leadership of Congregation of the Humility of Mary - Des Moines, IA  
 Leadership Team of Sisters of the Precious Blood, Dayton, Ohio - Dayton, OH  
 Leadership Team of the Felician Sisters of North America - Lodi, NJ  
 Leadership Team Sisters of the Presentation Dubuque IA - Dubuque, IA  
 Little Flower Convent - Scranton, PA  
 Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Church - Cedar Park, TX  
 Luther College Student Congregation - Decorah, IA  
 Mennonite Central Committee, Great Lakes - Goshen, IN  
 Menonites, Interfaith Alliance for Immigration Justice - Gainesville, FL  
 Mercy Associate - Providence, RI  
 Mercy Church, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) - Durham, NC  
 Milagro Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) - Pueblo, CO  
 Montana Immigrant Justice Alliance - Red Lodge, MT  
 New Sanctuary Coalition - New York, NY  
 New York State Interfaith Network for Immigration Reform - Forest Hills, NY  
 NorCal Coalition of Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking - Stockton, CA  
 Nuns on the Bus - OH - Sylvania, OH  
 Office of JPIC, Comboni Missionaries, North America - Newark, NJ  
 Oregon Province of the Society of Jesus - San Jose, CA  
 Our Lady of Victory Missionary Sisters - Huntington, IN  
 Our Lady Queen of Peace Catholic Church - Arlington, VA  
 P'nai Or Gainesville Jewish Renewal Congregation - Gainesville, FL  
 Parkview Baptist Church - Gainesville, FL  
 Pax Christi - Sioux Falls, SD  
 Pax Christi Dallas - Dallas, TX  
 Pax Christi Florida - Saint Augustine, FL  
 Pax Christi Maine - Biddeford, ME  
 Pennsylvania Council of Churches - Harrisburg, PA  
 Presentation of the Blessed - Sioux Falls, SD  
 Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary religious order - Sioux Falls, SD  
 Presentation Sisters Social Justice Team - Le Sueur, MN  
 Presentation Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary - Aberdeen, SD  
 Project IRENE - Wilmette, IL  
 Promoter of Justice for Dominican Sisters - Grand Rapids - Grand Rapids, MI  
 Promoter of Justice for Dominican Sisters - Grand Rapids - Albuquerque, NM  
 Provincial Council of the Clerics of St. Viator - Arlington Heights, IL  
 Redemptorist Fathers - Brooklyn, NY  
 Religious Congregation - Wheeling, WV  
 Religious Sisters of Charity - Culver City, CA  
 Religious Sisters of Mercy - Philadelphia, PA  
 Resurrection Community - Cincinnati, OH  
 RI Lasallian Association Group - Rumford, RI  
 RILAG - Providence, RI  
 Riverside Ave. Christian Church - Jacksonville, FL  
 Sacred Heart Parish Convent - Merrick, NY  
 Saint Andrew Christian Church - Goodlettsville, TN  
 Saint Bede Episcopal - Atlanta, GA  
 Saint Patrick's Convent - Long Island City, NY  
 San Jose Episcopal Church - Arlington, VA  
 San Rafael Dominicans - San Rafael, CA  
 Santa Maria de la Vid Abbey - Albuquerque, NM  
 School Sisters of Notre Dame AM JPIC Office - Wilton, CT  
 School Sisters of Notre Dame Office of Justice, Peace & Integrity of Creation - Saint Paul, MN  
 Sinsinawa Dominicans - Sinsinawa, WI



Sister of Mercy - Sun City West, AZ  
 Sisters of Charity - Cincinnati, OH  
 Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati - Mount Saint Joseph, OH  
 Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Ohio - Saint James City, FL  
 Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth - Leavenworth, KS  
 Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth - Convent Station, NJ  
 Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary - Dubuque, IA  
 Sisters of Charity Santo Nizo Project - Anthony, NM  
 Sisters of IHM - Center Moriches, NY  
 Sisters of Mercy - Portland, ME  
 Sisters of Mercy - Merion Station, PA  
 Sisters of Mercy - Pawtucket, RI  
 Sisters of Mercy Associates - Warren, RI  
 Sisters of Mercy Mid-Atlantic Justice Office - Merion Station, PA  
 Sisters of Mercy Northeast Justice Council - Bristol, RI  
 Sisters of Mercy Northeast Justice Council Member - Burlington, VT  
 Sisters of Mercy of the Americas - Santa Cruz, CA  
 Sisters of Mercy of the Americas - Gwynedd Valley, PA  
 Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross - Merrill, WI  
 Sisters of Mercy South Central Community - Belmont, NC  
 Sisters of Mercy West Midwest Community Justice Team - Omaha, NE  
 Sisters of Providence Peace with Justice Committee - Chicago, IL  
 Sisters of Saint Joseph Brentwood New York - Brentwood, NY  
 Sisters of Saint Joseph of Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia - Philadelphia, PA  
 Sisters of St. Dominic - Caldwell, NJ  
 Sisters of St. Dominic - Blauvelt, NY  
 Sisters of St. Francis - San Francisco, CA  
 Sisters of St. Francis Justice and Integrity of Creation Committee - Syracuse, NY  
 Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia - Aston, PA  
 Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities - Syracuse, NY  
 Sisters of St. Joseph - Rochester, NY  
 Sisters of St. Joseph - Jamaica, NY  
 Sisters of St. Joseph - Levittown, NY  
 Sisters of St. Joseph - Brentwood, NY  
 Sisters of St. Joseph - Wheeling, WV  
 Sisters of St. Joseph of Chambers Leadership Team - West Hartford, CT  
 Sisters of St. Joseph of Chestnut Hill - Philadelphia, PA  
 Sisters of St. Joseph of Northwestern Pennsylvanian - Erie, PA  
 Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester - Rochester, NY  
 Sisters of St. Joseph-Baden - Baden, PA  
 Sisters of St. Joseph, TOSF - Fort Wayne, IN  
 Sisters of St. Mary of Namur--Western Province - Fort Worth, TX  
 Sisters of the Holy Cross - Notre Dame, IN  
 Sisters of the Holy Cross - Congregation Justice Committee - Notre Dame, IN  
 Sisters of the Holy Family, Fremont - Fremont, CA  
 Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary - New Windsor, NY

Sisters of the Presentation of the BVM of Aberdeen SD - Aberdeen, SD  
 SNJM U.S. Ontario Province Leadership Team - Marylhurst, OR  
 Society of the Divine Savior - Owens Cross Roads, AL  
 Society of the Divine Savior - Tucson, AZ  
 Sophia in Trinity - San Francisco, CA  
 Southern Dominican Friars - Irving, TX  
 Springfield Dominican Justice Committee - Springfield, IL  
 Sr. of Charity of Nazareth Congregational Leadership - Nazareth, KY  
 Sr. of Charity of Nazareth Western Province Leadership - Nazareth, KY  
 Srs. of Immaculate Heart of Mary - Scranton, PA  
 Srs. of St. Dominic-Amityville - Amityville, NY  
 ss philip and james - Saint James, NY  
 St Camillus Church - Silver Spring, MD  
 St Mary Student Parish - Ann Arbor, MI  
 St Rita Catholic Community - Dade City, FL  
 st simon stock church - Bronx, NY  
 St Stanislaus Church, St. Paul, MN - Saint Paul, MN  
 St. Anthony of Padua Church - Rocky Point, NY  
 St. John Nepomucene - Oakdale, NY  
 St. Lawrence - Sayville, NY  
 St. Mary Magdalene R.C Church - Springfield Gardens, NY  
 St. Michael and All Angels' Episcopal Church - Columbia, SC  
 St. Stephen and the Incar - Washington, DC  
 The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Mont - Great Falls, MT  
 The Congregation of the Holy Spirit (The Spiritans) - Bethel Park, PA  
 The Kino Border Initiative - Nogales, AZ  
 The Leadership Council of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary - Monroe, Michigan - Monroe, MI  
 The Lord's Ranch - Vado, NM  
 The Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati - Cincinnati, OH  
 The United Church of Gainesville - Gainesville, FL  
 Trinitarians - Baltimore, MD  
 Twomey Center - New Orleans, LA  
 Union of Sisters of the Presentation of the B.V.M. - US Province - San Antonio, TX  
 Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Lowcountry - Okatie, SC  
 United Methodist Church - Tucson, AZ  
 Unity Temple Unitarian Universalist Congregation - Oak Park, IL  
 Ursuline Associates - Malone, NY  
 Ursulines of the Roamn Union Eastern Province of the US - New Rochelle, NY  
 Ursulines of the Roman Union - Bronxville, NY  
 Washtenaw Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights - Dexter, MI  
 Webster Groves Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) - Saint Louis, MO  
 Wellington Ave UCC - Chicago, IL  
 West Michigan Coalition for Immigration Reform - Grand Rapids, MI  
 Westminster Presbyterian Church in Gainesville - Gainesville, FL

# LETTER TO REP. BOEHNER FROM THE FR. THOMAS SMOLICH, S.J.



July 29, 2014

Speaker John Boehner  
1011 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Boehner,

I write to you as President of the Jesuit Conference of the United States, the organization that represents the Society of Jesus in the U.S., and I echo the message of our bishops and our Holy Father. I urge you to remember that amid the complications of policy and politics, we must be steadfast in our commitment to uphold the dignity of the human person and the sacredness of human life when considering policy solutions to address the increasing numbers of children fleeing harm in Central America.

Well before the 1989 assassination of six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter by U.S.-trained Salvadoran military forces, the Jesuits in the United States were partnering with Jesuits and colleagues in Central America. Since that time, Jesuits in the U.S. have been committed to ensuring that U.S. policy does not exacerbate difficult realities facing poor, marginalized communities. Over the last several years, our office and Jesuit Refugee Service/USA have tracked with growing alarm the increase in forced displacement and targeted violence—perpetrated by gangs, organized crime and state actors—in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

This is not a new crisis, nor is it primarily at our border. Rather, it has been escalating over the last decade in the Northern Triangle. For example, 90 children are murdered or disappeared in Honduras every month; this is the equivalent of eight children being executed in your Congressional district every thirty days.

The impact of this crisis has fallen most heavily on women and girls. From 2005 to 2012 there was a 346% increase in murders of women and girls in Honduras. Meanwhile El Salvador has the highest rate of homicides against women and girls in the world, and Guatemala ranks third on the same chart. Is it any wonder that young girls are leaving the region in record numbers, with a 140% increase in girls 12 and younger arriving unaccompanied at our border from the Northern Triangle this fiscal year?

The Jesuits of Central America see this reality daily: the elementary school teacher murdered when he tried to prevent gangs from forcibly recruiting his students; the young girl pulled from her home, offered as a birthday present to a gang leader and then raped by 16 men; lay colleagues of Jesuits assassinated and harassed by the police. Further, these three countries have little infrastructure and few services to care for women and girls victimized by violence or sexual

exploitation; less than 5% of female homicides end in a conviction. The collapse of civil society is evident in besieged schools, hollowed-out neighborhoods, and tortured, often dismembered bodies of children as young as two displayed in streets and ditches.

In this sobering context, I am reminded of Psalm 82, in which God asks the magistrates of the day “how long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?” God then exhorts these political leaders to “give justice to the weak and fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Psalm 82: 3-4).

While this message needs to be heard among leaders in the Northern Triangle, it also calls out to be heard by U.S. leaders dealing with this humanitarian crisis. In particular, I ask for your full and dedicated commitment to the following three policy issues:

**TVPRA:** A change to the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 (TVPRA), which would result in children having a one-shot chance to disclose their persecution to a Customs and Border Protection agent or officer, especially when some of them have been victimized by armed men in uniform, is inhumane and an insult to American values. Mr. Speaker, I am appalled by the suggestion that the U.S. should respond by cutting off access to safety for these children.

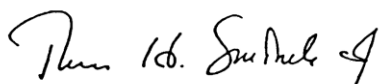
**Due process:** To meet Psalm 82’s standard, I ask you to protect the due process rights of these vulnerable children. Rather than rolling back the TVPRA, we should continue to ensure that traumatized and terrorized children have the time and opportunity they need to feel safe enough to share their experience. To echo the analysis of the National Association of Immigration Judges, this process must proceed at the speed of a child’s trust, not at the speed of political convenience. These children deserve an individualized process, a child welfare expert to evaluate their claim, and a legal advocate to help them navigate our complex judicial system.

**Root causes:** We cannot simply ignore this aspect of the problem. In order to address this crisis at its source, the United States must listen to people, among them the Jesuits in Central America, who intimately understand how we arrived at this tragic juncture. They, along with many others, have been calling on their governments to address impunity and corruption, improve judicial systems, expand educational access, strengthen—and in some cases build from scratch—child welfare services in the region, and support adequate return and reintegration programs to ensure that children who can safely remain in their home countries are able to do so. Our investments need to go here, not to corrupt or abusive security forces who themselves are often criminal.

I ask you, as a leader, a parent, and a Catholic, to uphold an American tradition of which we are all proud. We must welcome the refugee, the victim of trafficking, the child who has been abused or abandoned. Let us follow in the footsteps of Jesus when he said “Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14).

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Thm H. Smolich SJ". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Very Reverend Thomas H. Smolich, S.J.

President, Jesuit Conference USA

# REAL STORIES OF CENTRAL AMERICAN CHILDREN & FAMILIES

**Cristian Omar Reyes**, an 11-year-old sixth grader from **Honduras** lost his father in March after he was robbed and murdered by gangs while working as a security guard protecting a pastry truck. Three people he knows were murdered this year. Four others were gunned down on a nearby corner in the span of two weeks at the beginning of this year. A girl his age resisted being robbed of \$5. She was clubbed over the head and dragged off by two men who cut a hole in her throat, stuffed her panties in it, and left her body in a ravine across the street from Cristian's house. [New York Times, 7/11/14](#)

**Anthony O. Castellanos**, a 13-year old from Honduras, disappeared from his gang-ridden neighborhood, so his younger brother, Kenneth, hopped on his green bicycle to search for him, starting his hunt at a notorious gang hangout known as the "crazy house." They were found within days of each other, both dead. Anthony, 13, and a friend had been shot in the head; Kenneth, 7, had been tortured and beaten with sticks and rocks. They were among seven children murdered in the La Pradera neighborhood of San Pedro Sula in April alone. [New York Times, 7/9/14](#)

During a recent late-night visit to the San Pedro Sula morgue, more than 60 bodies, all victims of violence, were seen piled in a heap, each wrapped in a brown plastic bag. While picking bullets out of a 15-year-old boy shot 15 times, technicians discussed how they regularly received corpses of **children under 10, and sometimes as young as 2**. Last week, in nearby Santa Barbara, an **11-year-old** had his throat slit by other children, because he did not pay a 50-cent extortion fee. "At first we saw a lot of kids who were being killed because when the gang came for their parents, they happened to be in the car or at the location with them," said Dr. Darwin Armas Cruz, a medical examiner who works the overnight shift. "Now we see kids killing kids. They kill with guns, knives and even grenades." [New York Times, 7/9/14](#)

An older man with two grand-daughters, ages seven and 10, said: "**I left Honduras because they already killed three of my four sons. I can't stay to wait for them to take away my grand-daughters.** There the gangs kill for anything, take our houses, our pay. Everything." Asked if he wanted to go home, a six-year-old Honduran boy began to cry and told the reporter: "They kill people there, and you can't play." ([La Jornada, 6/29/14](#))

**Nodwin**, an 11-year old from **Honduras**: "Big people force the children to sell bad things, and if they don't do it, they rape them or they kill them." Nodwin once witnessed a boy his own age gang-raped in a neighborhood park after the child refused to join a local drug gang. "They were stripping a kid naked, and I went to tell the kid's mom. Later, I went home, but I didn't want to leave my house, because they could have done the same thing to me." [PBS NewsHour, 6/20/14](#)

**Jenny** opened her front door one day and there were pieces of a body thrown in a plastic bag on her doorstep as a warning from the gangs about what would happen to her if she did not become the "girlfriend" of a gang member. As related to a [Women's Refugee Commission](#) staff member during a focus group discussion.

**Maritza**, a 15-year old from **El Salvador** reported the following: I am here because the gang threatened me. One of them "liked" me. Another gang member told my uncle that he should get me out of there because the guy who liked me was going to do me harm. In El Salvador they take young girls, rape them and throw them in plastic bags. My uncle told me it wasn't safe for me to stay there. [UNCHR report](#)

**David**, a 16-year old from **Guatemala**, reported the following: Gangs in a nearby neighborhood wanted to kill me and some other people. They wanted me to give them money, but what money was I supposed to give them? I didn't have any. They asked me if I knew who they were, if I could identify them. I said no, because I knew if I said yes they would kill me. They held my cousin and me for three hours, tied up. My cousin was able to untie the rope and he helped me untie mine. We heard gun shots and we ran. They kept looking for us, but we escaped. [UNCHR report](#)

**Kevin**, a 17-year old from **Honduras**, reported the following: My grandmother wanted me to leave. She told me: "If you don't join, the gang will shoot you. If you do join, the rival gang will shoot you—or the cops will shoot you. But if you leave, no one will shoot you." [UNCHR report](#)

**Josephine**, a 16-year old from **El Salvador**: The head of the gang that controlled her neighborhood wanted Josefina to be his girlfriend and threatened to kidnap her or to kill one of her family members if she didn't comply. Josefina knew another girl from her community who had become the girlfriend of a gang member and had been forced to have sex with all the gang members. Josefina didn't want this for herself. Once the gang started harassing her, she didn't feel safe, so she stopped going to school and stayed at home until her family was able to make arrangements for her to travel to the U.S. [UNCHR report](#)

**Alfonso**, a 17-year old from **El Salvador**, reported the following: The problem was that where I studied there were lots of M-18 gang members, and where I lived was under control of the other gang, the MS-13. The M-18 gang thought I belonged to the MS-13. They had killed the two police officers who protected our school. They waited for me outside the school. It was a Friday, the week before Easter, and I was headed home. The gang told me that if I returned to school, I wouldn't make it home alive. The gang had killed two kids I went to school with, and I thought I might be the next one. After that, I couldn't even leave my neighborhood. They prohibited me. I know someone whom the gangs threatened this way. He didn't take their threats seriously. They killed him in the park. He was wearing his school uniform. If I hadn't had these problems, I wouldn't have come here. [UNCHR report](#)

**Mario**, a 17-year old from **El Salvador**, reported the following: I left because I had problems with the gangs. They hung out by a field that I had to pass to get to school. They said if I didn't join them, they would kill me. I have many friends who were killed or disappeared because they refused to join the gang. I told the gang I didn't want to. The more they saw me refusing to join, the more they started threatening me and telling me they would kill me if I didn't. They beat me up five times for refusing to help them. The pain from the beatings was so bad, I couldn't even stand up. They killed a friend of mine in March because he didn't want to join, and his body wasn't found until May. I went to the police twice to report the threats. They told me that they would do something; but when I saw that they weren't doing anything to help, I knew I had to leave. [UNCHR report](#).

**Kevin Briseño**, 18, and his friend **Omar Barrera**, 19, from **El Salvador**, both spoke about why it may be a death sentence for those who try to leave but are caught and sent back. One friend fled a year and a half ago after he was threatened and gang members murdered his father, a policeman. Their friend was trying to reach his mother in Maryland, but he was stopped in Mexico and returned to San Salvador. "**He was murdered the week after he got back**," Barrera said, shaking his head. [The Desert Sun, 7/13/14](#)

Stories relayed at a focus group held by the [Women's Refugee Commission](#): One girl said she was scared to take public transportation because Honduran gangs are burning buses full of people if the driver doesn't pay "protection money." She said gangs also regularly **burn jails and houses**. Another girl had to flee because of the rampant killings. Girls as young as nine are being **gang-raped by gang members** in their home countries. If a girl is impregnated, she will be left to care for the child until he or she is old enough to join the gang.

In **Honduras** in early May, at least **nine children were killed by armed criminal groups** in the La Pradera neighborhood in San Pedro Sula. All children were tortured, bound by their hands and feet, and shot in the face multiple times. Some had the skin on their faces peeled off. According to the BBC, the victims were targeted because they refused to join criminal gangs. And this is not just limited to one city. Covenant House reports that murders of children on the rise: 70 in December 2013, 90 each month from January through April 2014, and 102 in May 2014 alone.

Two workers at the San Pedro Sula morgue in **Honduras** said the number of bodies they receive is significantly higher today than it was a year ago. Stories are also piling up of young children forced to work as lookouts, messengers or spies for the gangs. **Eight children, between the ages of 7 and 13**, were kidnapped and killed in La Pradera barrio during May. Word on the street is that they were killed for refusing to join the dominant local gang. "In this job you become hardened to seeing death," says one of the morgue workers who recovered some of the bodies, and asks his name not be published. **"But to have to recover a child who has been cut to pieces and burned. That was just too much."** [The Guardian, 7/9/14](#)

One day in May, seven gang members boarded a public bus in San Salvador, **El Salvador's** capital. They were looking for two members of a rival gang. But they fired indiscriminately at passengers, **killing six people** and wounding a score of others, including a **2-year-old**. On that day alone, 31 people were murdered in San Salvador. The city averaged more than 12 murders a day in June, according to federal police. "The gangs are in schools, neighborhoods. They're everywhere," said Alison Ramirez, who works on a U.S.-funded, violence-prevention project in El Salvador and frequently visits Honduras and Guatemala. **"Even if the kids don't want to be a part of it, they get caught up in the cross fire, extorted, threatened."** [The Desert Sun, 7/13/14](#)

**Four children were stabbed to death** in May in Limon, a town in the **Honduran** Caribbean province of Colon, police said. The children, who ranged in **age from 2 to 13**, were murdered by unidentified individuals when they were left home alone, police chief Daniel Ferrufino told Honduran radio. [Fox News Latino, 5/4/14](#)

A family in Guatemala City received a knock on the door. Standing there were several gang members with one demand. **"We've come to take your daughter,"** they said, according to one of our local Church World Service partners. "Our boss wants her." It was an emergency and the family had to act quickly. The young teenage girl had no choice but to leave the country the next day, for her own protection. In the words of a local pastor who helped them, "Her sin was simply being pretty."

**Leticia, a pre-teen** was dragged from her home and raped by more than a dozen gang members in Honduras, so her family reported the crime to the police. The family immediately began receiving death threats. The content of the threats led the family to conclude that the police were in collusion with the gangs. When a local human rights group attempted to relocate Leticia to a women's shelter, but the shelter refused to take her in for fear it would not be able to protect Leticia or the other women from this gang's reign of terror. Honduras has only three women's shelters and the police use two of them as their own personal brothels. In the end, to protect Leticia from further harm, she had to leave Honduras. Honduras experienced a 346 percent increase in the murder rate of women and girls.

**Maria a 12-year-old girl** from Central America was trafficked for labor and sex, she fled with her baby to escape. Maria was kidnapped at gunpoint and taken to a home where she was held captive. She was beaten and raped on an almost daily basis and eventually forced into prostitution. Because of this she became pregnant and gave birth to a girl while captive. Maria fled with her child, riding on top of trains so that they might escape the sexual bondage. *Maria ended up qualifying for a T-visa and is currently doing well. She has now graduated high school.*

**Rosa, a pregnant 15-year-old girl** from Honduras fled to U.S. to escape threats against herself and her unborn child. In Honduras, Rosa had been attending school part of the day and working in the fields the rest of the day. One day while



working, she was raped by a man in the community. The rape resulted in pregnancy. Rosa filed a police report about the incident, but then received threats against her life from the friends of her rapist to withdraw her police report and later to abort the baby. The threats continued so Rosa worked with her family to flee to the U.S. to seek safety and where she can carry her pregnancy full-term. *A child like Rosa might apply for asylum.*

**Laura, an 8-year-old girl** from Honduras fled domestic violence and kidnapping. Laura was living in Honduras with her aunt while mother was in the U.S. working to provide for her family. One day a man she called “step-father” who was an ex-boyfriend of her mother’s, kidnapped her from her aunt’s care. Laura’s mother in the U.S. said she could not report the kidnapping to authorities as they would do nothing. This step-father beat Laura daily with belts and pieces of wood, resulting in bruises, bleeding, and leaving visible scars on her body. On multiple occasions, he also threatened to kill her with a gun. The step father finally threatened Laura’s mother that he would kill the Laura if her mother did not send him money. Laura’s mother was finally able to save and send a large amount of money to the step-father and Laura was able to escape to come live with her in the U.S. *A child like Laura might apply for asylum.*

**Mario is a 16 year old boy** from Honduras who decided to make the journey to the United States after several of the male members of his family were killed by drug traffickers. Mario lived with his parents and siblings in Honduras and worked on a local farm in order to help support his family. He had not been able to attend school for five years due to his family’s economic situation. Mario’s his life in Honduras was fairly normal until his family was attacked. Since his father was financially successful without being involved in the drug trade others in their community became jealous of the family. He has stated that this is why his father, brother, cousin and uncle were all violently murdered one day. Mario and his family lived in fear of these individuals and the possibility that they would cause further harm to the family. Mario has a sister in the U.S. with whom he hopes to live—so he can go to school in a safe environment like a normal teenager. *A child like Mario, might seek asylum or a special immigrant juvenile status visa.*

**Jesus, is a 17-year-old Guatemalan boy** who came to the U.S. to escape a drug-trafficking gang who brutally murdered some of his family. When Jesus was 7 years old, his older sister and older brother were kidnapped. The family paid money to the kidnappers but the children were not released. Authorities eventually found the mutilated bodies of his siblings. The group that murdered the siblings started making threats to the rest of his family. Jesus and his younger sister started being intimidated in the community by people they believed to be part of a drug trafficking gang. These threats caused Jesus to decide to flee to the U.S. *A child like Jesus might apply for a trafficking visa, special immigrant juvenile status visa, or asylum.*

**Juan, a 12-year-old boy from Honduras** and his disabled 17 year old sister Maria, fled domestic violence and trafficking. Juan and Maria lived with their uncle, who was physically abusive to both of them. Maria was raped by her father at a young age and continued to be raped once she entered the care of her uncle. While living with his uncle, Juan was trafficked by a man to download, burn, and distribute pornography. He was threatened with a gun to continue creating this pornography or he would be shot. Upon abandonment by their uncle, the children were sent to the U.S. to live with a distant relative. *Children like Juan and Maria might apply for a trafficking visa, special immigrant juvenile status visa, or asylum.*

**Carla, a 17-year-old teen,** fled attempted rape by mother’s partner. Carla’s mother’s boyfriend attempted to molest Carla. Carla immediately reported it to her mother. Her mother ended the relationship with her boyfriend. The ex-boyfriend then started threatening Carla’s life because he was outraged at the reported abuse. Carla’s mom immediately sent her to the U.S. to escape the death threat. *A child like Carla might apply for asylum.*

**Carlos, a 13-year-old boy** from El Salvador, fled to the U.S. after witnessing his mother’s brutal murder. Four gunmen broke into Carlos’s home and shot Carlos’s mother right in front of him. The gunmen where never caught, which lead to the child and family feeling afraid in their community. The child suffered from severe trauma because of this event. Due

to this, his family in El Salvador decided to send him to live with a relative in the U.S. where he would not be in danger of his life and have better care. *A child like Carlos might apply for asylum.*

**Ana, a 12-year-old girl** from Honduras, fled gang abuse and abandonment by mother. Ana's mother has a history of psychiatric care and violence against her 3 children. Ana was forced to care for her disabled younger siblings. Ana was also sexually abused as a young child. Ana finally was forced to flee because her family started to be threatened by a local gang. *A child like Ana might apply for asylum or a special immigrant juvenile status visa.*

**David, a 17-year-old boy**, fled Honduras after his life was threatened. David was living with a 32 year old friend. One day, David forgot to put the farm equipment away after his work was completed. The friend and David's caregiver threatened to shoot David. Fearing for his life, David fled to the U.S. *A child like David might apply for asylum or a special immigrant juvenile status visa.*

**Rodrigo, 17-year-old boy** from Honduras, fled domestic violence. Rodrigo was physically abused often in Honduras by his father. His father would hit him with anything around the house that he could find. One day his father threatened to kill the minor with a machete. Rodrigo afraid for his life, fled to the U.S. to escape. *A child like Rodrigo might apply for asylum or a special immigrant juvenile status visa.*

**Ruth, a 16-year-old girl** fled violence in Honduras. Ruth was abandoned by her mother when she was 10 years old, her father then started to abuse her. When the violence started to escalate in her community, Ruth finally made the decision she needed to flee to the U.S. *A child like Ruth might apply for asylum or a special immigrant juvenile status visa.*

**Tina, 16-year-old girl** from Guatemala fled to the U.S. because of child abuse. Tina was living with her father in Guatemala who was physically abusive. He would hit her with tree branches and cords on her back and legs. Tina has scars all over her body from the abuse. She came to the US to escape the abuse. *A child like Tina might apply for asylum or a special immigrant juvenile status visa.*

**Dominic, 15-year-old boy**, fled Guatemala's gangs. In Dominic's neighborhood, a gang tried to recruit him and pressure him into smoking marijuana. His friend told him one day that members of the gang were waiting in a nearby park to physically assault the minor. Dominic immediately made the choice to start his journey to the U.S. *A child like Dominic might apply for asylum.*

**Hannah** survived multiple rapes in Honduras. After she fled, she was kidnapped by a Mexican gang that raped and tortured her. She eventually got to the United States.

**Nancy and Ofelia**, at ages 15 and 8, fled El Salvador. Their older female cousins had been forced to work as sex slaves for gang leaders. The gang threatened to kill Nancy and her family. Nancy and Ofelia fled to the U.S. and were placed in removal proceedings.

**Elisabet** fled El Salvador when she was 8 years old. Gang members had kidnapped her two older sisters. The girls' mother did not want her 8-year-old daughter to suffer the same fate, so she arranged for her daughter to be brought to the United States.

**Lisa** fled an area of El Salvador controlled by gangs. Her brother was killed for refusing to join a gang that tried to forcibly recruit him. She was raped by two men and became pregnant as a result. She was then required to pay *renta* to the rapists, which increased over time. She fled El Salvador and was attacked by Mexican robbers during the journey, before arriving to the United States.

**Alejandra** fled an area of El Salvador controlled by MS-13. Between the ages of 13 and 15, she witnessed two murders, several shootings, and helped identify the dismembered body of her best friend. She had male friends who were murdered for not joining gangs. She had girl friends who were raped and murdered for not submitting to gang members' demands. Alejandra was forced to pay *renta* to MS-13. After her friend was shot and killed, a gang member threatened to kill her and harm her mother if she didn't pay higher *renta*. She fled to the U.S. and applied for her asylum. Her application is pending.

**Joana** was kidnapped by a gang in Honduras that attempted to traffic her into prostitution. She escaped and reported the kidnapping to the police. The gang then abducted her again, raped her, and burned her with cigarettes. She fled to the U.S. and is seeking asylum.

**Beatrice** fled Guatemala to Mexico, after suffering years of child abuse. She was then forced into prostitution. She escaped and boarded a train headed north where she met a man who offered to help her get in the United States. After being sexually abused by this man, Beatrice escaped and entered the United States. She applied for asylum, was placed into removal proceedings, and an immigration judge eventually granted her asylum.

**Reina** was kidnapped by a group of men who sexually abused her and forced her into prostitution for two years. She eventually escaped and fled to the United States. Once here, a social worker trained in child welfare and trafficking protection, identified her as a trafficking survivor.

*Names have been changed to protect their identities.*

# PRAYERS FOR MIGRANTS, REFUGEES & ASYLUM SEEKERS

## Prayer for Migrants & Refugees

Lord Jesus, when you multiplied the loaves and fishes, you provided more than food for the body, you offered us the gift of yourself, the gift which satisfies every hunger and quenches every thirst! Your disciples were filled with fear and doubt, but you poured out your love and compassion on the migrant crowd, welcoming them as brothers and sisters.

Lord Jesus, today you call us to welcome the members of God's family who come to our land to escape oppression, poverty, persecution, violence, and war. Like your disciples, we too are filled with fear and doubt and even suspicion. We build barriers in our hearts and in our minds.

Lord Jesus, help us by your grace,

- To banish fear from our hearts, that we may embrace each of your children as our own brother and sister;
- To welcome migrants and refugees with joy and generosity, while responding to their many needs;
- To realize that you call all people to your holy mountain to learn the ways of peace and justice;
- To share of our abundance as you spread a banquet before us;
- To give witness to your love for all people, as we celebrate the many gifts they bring.

We praise you and give you thanks for the family you have called together from so many people. We see in this human family a reflection of the divine unity of the one Most Holy Trinity in whom we make our prayer: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

[SOURCE: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops]

## Prayer for Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers

God, no one is stranger to you  
And no one is ever far from your loving care.  
In your kindness watch over migrants, refugees and asylum seekers,  
Those separated from their loved ones,  
Those who are lost  
And those who have been exiled from their homes.  
Bring them safely to the place where they long to be,  
And help us always to show your kindness to strangers  
And those in need.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord,  
Who too was a refugee and migrant  
Who travelled to another land  
Searching for a home.

Amen

[SOURCE: Nouwen Network]

## Prayer for Migrants

For all those who see “home” and all it means

Disappear behind them;  
For all those who cannot see a home  
In the days ahead of them;  
For all those who dwell in  
Daily insecurity;  
For all those who are weary and  
Without a safe place to rest their heads;  
For all families in migration we pray.  
May the image of the Holy Family  
Fleeing oppression stay with us as we enter a New Year,  
And stay with us each night as we are blessed  
With returning to a home.  
May we also be blessed  
With compassion for those  
Still weary, still seeking,  
Still with so far to go.

[SOURCE: Jane Deren, 2007]

### **Let Us See**

Dear God, our journey through life is long and hard. We cannot make this trip alone; we must walk together on the journey. You promised to send us a helper, your Spirit. Help us to see your Spirit in those you send to journey with us.

In the refugee family, seeking safety from violence, Let us see your Spirit.

In the migrant worker, bringing food to our tables, Let us see your Spirit.

In the asylum-seeker, seeking justice for himself and his family, Let us see your Spirit.

In the unaccompanied child, traveling in a dangerous world, Let us see your Spirit.

Teach us to recognize that as we walk with each other, you are present. Teach us to welcome not only the strangers in our midst but the gifts they bring as well: the invitation to conversion, communion, and solidarity

This is the help you have sent: we are not alone. We are together on the journey, and for this we give you thanks.

Amen.

[SOURCE: Rev. Enock De Assis]

# PRAYERS OF INTENTION FOR MIGRANTS, REFUGEES & IMMIGRANTS

## General

For the children who are US citizens, but live in fear of broken families because of the undocumented status of their parents, that God may bring them Hope as we work toward conversion of hearts and minds. Let us pray to the Lord,

For the teens and young adults who were brought to this country as children and have now been deported to a country they barely know, that God will be with them and guide them to reunite with their families. Let us pray to the Lord,

Recalling that Our Lord told his disciples to „let the children come to me“, that we may welcome the children of immigrants and work to provide security and dignity to the lives of their families, we pray to the Lord...

## Topic: DREAMERs and Dream Act

For the immigrant children who have known only this country and work hard at school, that they may know the value of their work through the support of the DREAM Act, we pray to the Lord.

## Topic: Deportees and broken families

For immigrant families, suffering in the shadows from poverty and brokenness, may God bless them and protect them as we all work for a reform of the immigration laws. Let us pray to the Lord,

For immigrant families searching for life and dignity, that they may find it wherever God leads them as we work together for conversion of hearts and minds. Let us pray to the Lord,

## Topics: Plight of the immigrant: pain, rejection, and fear

For the Immigrant that faces rejection and pain in this country, that they may know the value of their life and work no matter where they live, and that they find a welcoming community here in this country. Let us pray to the Lord,

Recalling the fear that the disciples felt after the death of Jesus, may the immigrant in this country come to know the power and strength of the Holy Spirit through our welcoming embrace. Let us pray to the Lord,

That by seeing God's presence more clearly in every human life, we may repent of the ways that we have failed to honor, protect, and welcome that life, including the life of the immigrant, we pray to the Lord...

## Topic: Violence at the Border

For those fleeing the violence and corruption in their homelands of Mexico or South America, that they may find safety and security as they search for safety in a new land. Let us pray to the Lord,

## Topic: Conversion & transformation of hearts

That God, who always hears the cry of the oppressed and the immigrant, may enable us to hear those cries and be moved to conversion and transformation, working to reform the unjust immigration laws in this country. Let us pray to the Lord,



For God's forgiveness for those citizens who have not been welcoming and tolerant of the immigrant in this country, that they may come to realize God's call to welcome Christ in the immigrant. Let us pray to the Lord,

For our community, gathered here today to celebrate our unity under the Lord, and his mother, Mary, that we may come to greater understanding and acceptance of our differences, we pray to the Lord.

[SOURCE: Archdiocese of Chicago]

# QUOTES FROM POPE FRANCIS ON MIGRANTS & REFUGEES

*The Church is mother and her motherly attention is expressed with special tenderness and closeness to those who are obliged to flee their own country and exist between rootlessness and integration. This tension destroys people. Christian compassion — this “suffering with”, compassion — is expressed first of all in the commitment to obtain knowledge of the events that force people to leave their homeland, and, where necessary, to give voice to those who cannot manage to make their cry of distress and oppression heard. By doing this you also carry out an important task in sensitizing Christian communities to the multitudes of their brethren scarred by wounds that mark their existence: violence, abuse, the distance from family love, traumatic events, flight from home, uncertainty about the future in refugee camps. These are all dehumanizing elements and must spur every Christian and the whole community to practical concern. (5/24/13)*

*I would like to ask you all to see a ray of hope as well in the eyes and hearts of refugees and of those who have been forcibly displaced. A hope that is expressed in expectations for the future, in the desire for friendship, in the wish to participate in the host society also through learning the language, access to employment and the education of children. I admire the courage of those who hope to be able gradually to resume a normal life, waiting for joy and love to return to brighten their existence. We can and must all nourish this hope! (5/24/13)*

*Above all I ask leaders and legislators and the entire international community above all to confront the reality of those who have been displaced by force, with effective projects and new approaches in order to protect their dignity, to improve the quality of their life and to face the challenges that are emerging from modern forms of persecution, oppression and slavery. (5/24/13)*

*They are human people, I stress this, who are appealing for solidarity and assistance, who need urgent action but also and above all understanding and kindness. God is good, let us imitate God. Their condition cannot leave us indifferent. Moreover, as Church we should remember that in tending the wounds of refugees, evacuees and the victims of trafficking, we are putting into practice the commandment of love that Jesus bequeathed to us when he identified with the foreigner, with those who are suffering, with all the innocent victims of violence and exploitation. We should reread more often chapter 25 of the Gospel according to Matthew in which he speaks of the Last Judgement (cf. vv. 31-46). And here I would also like to remind you of the attention that every Pastor and Christian community must pay to the journey of faith of Christian refugees and Christians uprooted from their situations by force, as well as of Christian emigrants. These people need special pastoral care that respects their traditions and accompanies them to harmonious integration into the ecclesial situations in which they find themselves. May our Christian communities really be places of hospitality, listening and communion! (5/24/13)*

*Dear friends, let us not forget the flesh of Christ which is in the flesh of refugees: their flesh is the flesh of Christ. It is also your task to direct all the institutions working in the area of forced migration to new forms of co-responsibility. This phenomenon is unfortunately constantly spreading. Hence your task is increasingly demanding in order to promote tangible responses of closeness, journeying with people, taking into account the different local backgrounds. (5/24/13)*

*Immigrants dying at sea, in boats which were vehicles of hope and became vehicles of death. That is how the headlines put it. When I first heard of this tragedy a few weeks ago, and realized that it happens all too frequently, it has constantly come back to me like a painful thorn in my heart. So I felt that I had to come here today, to pray and to offer a sign of my closeness, but also to challenge our consciences lest this tragedy be repeated. Please, let it not be repeated! (7/8/13)*

*"Where is your brother?" His blood cries out to me, says the Lord. This is not a question directed to others; it is a question directed to me, to you, to each of us. These brothers and sisters of ours were trying to escape difficult situations to find some serenity and peace; they were looking for a better place for themselves and their families, but instead they found death. How often do such people fail to find understanding, fail to find acceptance, fail to find solidarity. And their cry rises up to God! Once again I thank you, the people of Lampedusa, for your solidarity. I recently listened to one of these*

*brothers of ours. Before arriving here, he and the others were at the mercy of traffickers, people who exploit the poverty of others, people who live off the misery of others. How much these people have suffered! Some of them never made it here. (7/8/13)*

*I will also pray in a special way for our brothers and sisters, men, women and children who have died of thirst, hunger or from the exhaustion on the journey to find a better life. In recent days we have seen those terrible images of the desert in the newspapers. Let us all pray in silence for these brothers and sisters of ours. (11/1/13)*

*Grant that migrants in search of a dignified life may find acceptance and assistance. May tragedies like those we have witnessed this year, with so many deaths at Lampedusa, never occur again! (12/25/13)*

*Child of Bethlehem, touch the hearts of all those engaged in human trafficking, that they may realize the gravity of this crime against humanity. Look upon the many children who are kidnapped, wounded and killed in armed conflicts, and all those who are robbed of their childhood and forced to become soldiers. (12/25/13)*

*As we fix our gaze on the Holy Family of Nazareth as they were forced to become refugees, let us think of the tragedy of those migrants and refugees who are victims of rejection and exploitation, who are victims of human trafficking and of slave labor. (12/29/13)*

*Likewise, we cannot but be moved by the many refugees seeking minimally dignified living conditions, who not only fail to find hospitality, but often, tragically, perish in moving from place to place. (1/17/14)*