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Florida should stand with, not abandon, refugees



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A bill in the 2017 Florida Legislative session that calls for the state to withdraw from a federal refugee resettlement program could have a devastating impact on the lives of thousands of new Americans and ultimately damage the economic stability of our communities.

House Bill 427 proposes Florida's withdrawal from the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program, a federal program that for years has helped individuals and families seeking refuge and a chance to rebuild their lives in freedom. Withdrawing means Florida would leave on the table federal funds necessary to help new Americans assimilate.

As lawmakers in Tallahassee discuss the bill this week, we remain deeply concerned about the repercussions of this proposed legislation as it threatens to shut down much needed agencies and programs that provide services such as vocational training, case management, employment placement and others. These refugees have been vetted and have legal status in our country.

In Florida, we have historically committed to creating a welcoming environment for new Americans, and have put in place mechanisms and pathways to ensure they become productive, contributing citizens in our communities. Through contracts with the Florida Department of Children & Families, numerous community-based organizations, school boards, colleges and universities, municipal governments and other entities deliver services that are vital to the well-being of these individuals and the strength of local economies. Any threat to the sustainability of these programs puts the success of our newest neighbors, and that of our communities, in jeopardy.

While often unnoticed, the impact of our new American resettlement programs is widespread. For example, in fiscal year 2017, nearly 40 percent of all funds have been allocated to assist refugees become immediately employed, and another 22 percent supports English classes to help individuals and families more easily adjust. Programs such as Refugee/Entrant Vocational Education, Services and Training (REVEST) at Miami Dade College and the Skills for Academic, Vocational and English Studies (SAVES) program at Miami-Dade County Public Schools help new Americans learn English, prepare to pass the GED and enroll in technical certificate courses.

These efforts eventually create a new pool of skilled employees ready to become productive members of our workforce. These programs also instill an appreciation for civic engagement, and eventually help refugees become citizens of this great nation.

Venezuelan refugee María Ramos is one of tens of thousands of individuals and families who have benefited from the life-changing work of our state's refugee resettlement programs.

After fleeing political persecution in her homeland, María and her husband settled in Miami, where she spent weekends at a local flea market selling clothes she made as a seamstress. Then Maria found SAVES and, after several ESOL courses, she was able to pass the GED exam, enroll in an accounting assistance program and join the workforce.

Similarly, Cuban refugee Carlos Galguera Solís improved his English skills at REVEST, and eventually enrolled in a Computer Programming College Certificate Program. Carlos went on to win first place in the Association for Computing Machinery's International Collegiate Programming 2013 Southeast Regional Competition.

Like María and Carlos, nearly 15,000 other new Americans found work in 2016 through state-sponsored refugee employment programs. These individuals and families have been given the opportunity to succeed because of our resettlement programs, and as a result, our local communities are benefiting from the skills and talents they provide as productive members of society.

As Floridians, we must continue to provide support and hospitality to these families. Turning our backs on them is simply unacceptable and not strategic.

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