



700 N. Killingsworth Street | Portland, Oregon 97217 | (503) 287-4117 | www.uniteoregon.org

To: Chair Keny-Guyer, members of the House committee on Human Services and Housing

Re: Testimony for support for HB 2508

My name is Suad Elmi. I am here to share my experience as a Somali refugee, a proud Oregonian, and a community organizer with Unite Oregon. I ask you to support refugee services in Oregon through HB 2508.

After civil war erupted in 1990, my family fled to a refugee camp in Kenya. I was 8 years old and the youngest of my siblings. It typically takes 5-10 years to go through the process of possibly being chosen to resettle in another country. My mother made the choice to send me to the U.S. with my two nieces when we got the chance. It was a very hard decision that my mother made to let us go. She wanted us to have a better life.

I left Kenya at age 14, with my nieces 10 and 8 years old. After coming here we were met by Catholic Charities. The couple who we came to the U.S. with were abusive and we were sent to foster care. Without knowing the language, without having a community to depend on, I raised my nieces as I resettled in a new land. Throughout this process, Catholic Charities stayed with me. They supported me with resources and compassionate guidance to achieve my dreams. They helped pay for my schooling, so I could go to college. My nieces have since finished high school and college; one is a nurse and the other is a hair stylist and beautician. Their mother, my sister was not as fortunate. She died of malaria in the camp, which is why my mother took care of them before it was my turn. My mother and my father also died in the refugee camp. Kids I played with in the 1990's are still in the camp. All of my siblings and their children are still at the same refugee camp, while I build a life here and am raising five children who go to Oregon public schools. They do not have schools or jobs in the refugee camps. They live in bamboo huts where fires easily leave the old, sick and babies for dead. I feel grateful to be here and sad at the same time.

Here in Oregon, I have built a community center for refugees who have gone through the same heartbreaking experiences as I have. I teach kids from all over the world so they can be tutored for U.S. school expectations. Transitions for children are very difficult. At Hoyo's House, which means, Mom's House, they can feel supported and be in community with others. We hold different types of group meetings and welcome all newcomers. I am happy to say that we are far from the only refugee-led support organization in this area. There are many. And each leader, each community member, each person and every child came only through the help of Catholic Charities, Lutheran Community Services and Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. These three organizations have made the kind of difference in lives that go beyond words. What I can say is that we can only do this work together.



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Catholic Charities helped me become the person I am today. There are people waiting who need their help and the help of refugee-led organizations, in Oregon. Please keep their doors open and as wide as the welcoming doors of Hoyo's House.

Thank you,

Suad Elmi