

March 7, 2023

To: House Committee on Early Childhood and Human Services Re: HB 3176  
Chair Reynolds, Vice-Chair Nguyen, Vice-Chair Scharf, and members of the committee:

My name is Alyssa Walker Keller, and I am the Asylum Seeker Project Coordinator for the Interfaith Movement for Immigrant Justice (IMIRJ). IMIRJ has worked since 2006 in organizing faith communities and advocating alongside immigrant communities for more just immigration policies. I am writing in favor of funding housing and supportive services for newly arrived immigrants seeking protection in the US through HB 3176.

Since 2018, IMIRJ's court Accompaniment Program has brought us into relationship with asylum seekers and into a clearer understanding of the specific challenges they face in Oregon. Unlike refugees and other immigrant communities who arrive with work authorization in hand and other Federal benefits, we know asylum seekers are unique: they do not qualify for the majority of state or federally funded programs, and are not immediately eligible to work, despite being authorized to be in the country. It is a cruel irony that in our sanctuary state, there is no structure or system in place to provide support for our newest Oregonians, who arrive fleeing trauma and displacement through the southern border. They are every bit as vulnerable and in need of assistance as those who receive support from refugee resettlement organizations, but there is no funding dedicated to their case management and housing.

The need is great. Just this week, we have been asked about housing within our community and congregations for 3 asylum seekers who reached out after sleeping in the airport or on the streets. IMIRJ has fielded dozens...hundreds... of calls over the years from asylum seekers when someone is unwell, or has a friend arriving tomorrow from the border, or does not have money for a meal, or is scheduled to appear in immigration court. Time and again we have accompanied individuals and families who are unable to access case management that would have helped them find even temporary shelter, necessary medical care, school enrollment, food, and transportation services.

IMIRJ faith communities and other culturally specific partner organizations work with this marginalized community in the absence of a funding structure, but we cannot meet the scale of the need without state investment. **We support all efforts to fund and improve the support systems for those who arrive without work authorization or other support services.** We want all immigrant communities in Oregon to thrive, and we're concerned that a lack of language specifically identifying asylum seekers as recipients will result in their not receiving services, because there is no organization who receives case management funding to lobby for them. **We are pleased to see that HB 3176 is proposing some solutions to this problem, and would like to suggest the following amendments to address the inequity of benefits allocated to asylum seekers:**

- The language in the bill addresses "immigrants and refugees." **We propose adding language to specifically identifying "newly arrived immigrants seeking**

**protection in the U.S and refugees”, or “immigrants/asylum seekers and refugees”,** as this would make it clear that all support offered applies to those seeking asylum as well.

- In our work with asylum seekers, **housing is the first and most important need they prioritize.** For those seeking asylum and who have no other support, **including housing assistance as an explicit priority to both short-term and long-term provisions in the bill is an important addition.** This could look many different ways; public/private partnerships, stipends/vouchers, emergency housing for a limited duration that leads to placement in affordable housing, etc. Unlike other immigrant populations named in these bills, asylum seekers have never had access to housing and case management services. Prioritizing investment in their housing stabilization will have more impact than if the funds are divided among many support services and/or at the same rate as communities who already receive housing support.
- **We would like to see a more formal accountability structure for grantees that includes accountability to the impacted community.** We suggest that performance outcomes from grantees must include feedback from community members using the services. These outcomes should be used in the prioritization of how funds are allocated.

This sessions’ legislation could be a landmark opportunity to prioritize funding for housing and case management to underserved immigrant communities. By amending the bill’s language to identify asylum seekers/those seeking protection in the US specifically, this funding will provide more equitable access for a population that has received no funding or resources. We and our congregations are committed to elevating the requests asylum seekers have shared with us, and to working alongside partners and immigrant communities to build legislation that is strong, cost effective, and responsive to the community’s needs. We look forward to the state’s investment in creating a more just, stable, and vibrant Oregon for our newest neighbors.

Sincerely,

Alyssa Walker Keller