



March 29, 2019

Dear Friends,

I write today to share the sad news that the CWS Richmond office will be closing at the end of September of this year. Before I provide more information about the office closure I'd like to start with a few words of thanks.

The greater Richmond community has opened its arms to refugees fleeing war and persecution – and has had its kindness returned many times over as our newest Americans have succeeded in school, business, and community. It started with a welcome – and we at Church World Service are grateful beyond words for that.

The faith community has been at the absolute heart of what we do – with volunteers helping new families from the moment they arrived at the Richmond airport. Meals were cooked, furniture donated, shelter provided, jobs were found for the adults and children were enrolled in school – and everyone became an English teacher! Most importantly the families we serve, who had lost or been separated from their loved ones, were welcomed by people who cared and became new friends.

In 1962, a plane carrying Cuban citizens fleeing the Castro regime came to Richmond and were warmly received by the Virginia Council of Churches (VCC), our close partner in refugee resettlement for several decades. Working together we welcomed refugees from all over the globe – Vietnam, Somalia, Iraq, Iran, the Former Yugoslavia, Sudan, Romania, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Liberia, Afghanistan, Burma, Bhutan, Turkey, Russia, Cuba, Cambodia, Poland, Hungary, El Salvador, Bosnia, and elsewhere. All of us at CWS are sincerely thankful for the legacy of compassion and caring embodied in our shared work.

In recent years, we and our Richmond-area partners have resettled many people with Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs), who have faced great dangers working alongside our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan as interpreters and in other support roles – and then came under threat themselves from terrorists for this association. We are grateful for their service and for how they have enriched our lives here as new Americans.

So many staff and volunteers have given their time and talents at CWS over the years. Many of our past staff and four of our current staff came to this country as refugees or SIVs. Their lived experience brought great depth and breadth to our service: nothing gives hope in the face of adversity more than seeing others who have successfully made the same difficult journey. We deeply appreciate all your good work.

Likewise, we have worked closely with countless professional and volunteer colleagues in the nonprofit and public sector here in Richmond, whose work we admire and appreciate greatly. The State Refugee Coordinator, Seyoum Berhe, and his staff – and Jill Grumbine, the State Refugee Health Coordinator – have brought a positive,

constructive and engaged energy to refugee resettlement in Virginia, for which we are grateful.

These past two years have been challenging for refugee resettlement offices across the country. As a nation that has always proudly led the world in numbers of refugees resettled, we are now receiving roughly a quarter of the 85,000 people that we resettled just three years ago. This has been devastating for refugee families, many of whom have waited many years or even decades to start their new lives here. All nine resettlement agencies, including CWS, have had to shrink their networks through layoffs and office closings. And all are struggling to hold the line as we await a return to more historically normal, and more compassionate, policies and funding levels.

We will be working to help clients who are scheduled to complete their programs within the next six months and will be working with our clients and partner agencies to transfer any remaining active cases. We are so fortunate in Richmond to have Commonwealth Catholic Charities, the International Rescue Committee, ReEstablish Richmond, and many other nonprofit organizations – as well as our colleagues at schools, social services, health departments, and others. We have every confidence that our refugee families will continue to be served well.

CWS is very proud of its work in Virginia over these many years, and we are pleased that we are continuing our excellent programs in Harrisonburg – another of Virginia's most welcoming cities.

We look forward to seeing many of you in the community in the coming months. For now, I'd like to say one more thank-you, to our refugee families: You have been our teachers in all of this. Thank you for your patience and kindness, and for letting us have a small part in your new beginnings.

Sincerely,

John Baumann
Virginia Director
CWS Immigration and Refugee Program