

Letter from Board of Aldermen

COPY

July 5, 2016

Ms. Anne C. Richard
Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration
U.S. Department of State
2201 C. St. NW #5805
Washington, DC 20520

Re: Refugee Resettlement in Rutland, Vermont

Dear Ms. Richard:

We are writing to you in our roles as the 11 elected members of the Board of Aldermen, the governing entity of the City of Rutland, Vermont. Our city has been proposed as the site for a new reception and placement program by the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) and the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program (VRRP).

As our mayor stated to you in his letter of April 28, 2016, Rutland is a compassionate and welcoming community with a rich history that is built on an immigrant population. We are hard-working, generous and caring. We take pride that local businesses and volunteers organized a Gift of Life blood drive in which our small community of less than 17,000 people broke the national one-day record for blood donations. Many of the wonderful services, activities and places we enjoy in our community are made possible by the generosity of volunteers and donors. There are already several hundred volunteers that have organized to serve the needs of the refugee population proposed to be resettled here.

However, in the months following VRRP's and the mayor's April announcement that Rutland would be hosting refugees, a significant part of our community has also grown anxious about the program, due in large part to the limited community education and outreach that has occurred. Many people have instead turned to their own online research, which has led to questions concerning economics, health, education and security.

USCRI and VRRP made themselves available to the public on one occasion for several hours and answered questions to the best of their ability. Nevertheless, to date, many questions have still not been addressed by either city government or the VOLAG groups. An estimated 7%-8% of the city's registered voters have now signed a petition to request the placement of a question on the ballot as to whether the City should "decline to participate in a refugee resettlement program at this time" due to the lack of information received.

As a board, we have not had access to much more information than the public. We were unaware of USCRI/VRRP's 6-month fact-finding exercise leading up to the April announcement. We have never been included in, or invited to, any meetings or planning sessions. We have been able to educate ourselves to some extent by taking proactive steps to (1) facilitate the USCRI/VRRP visit, (2) host town officials from Winooski, VT last week to hear about their experiences with refugee resettlement, and (3)

hold a public forum to collect questions. It is our understanding that the federal government asks VOLAG groups to closely cooperate with local government and consult with them in advance. We also understand that the required letter of support for the VOLAG application should come from the governing entity of the newly proposed site.

USCRI/VRFP did recently go out-of-their-way to quickly gather answers to a subset of 25-30 questions generated by that public forum and supplied to them by our board. We are slowly collecting information and trying to determine the best way to pass that information along to community members.

The fact remains, however, that we are still learning about the program and still trying to identify and address concerns to which the lack of information and outreach has contributed. Therefore, as the governing entity of the city, we do not feel we are currently in a position to be able to provide a letter of support for the proposal to establish a new reception and placement program in Rutland.

We would welcome an opportunity to discuss the program further with you, answer questions you may have or provide feedback.

Thank you for your consideration,

David W. Accario
[Signature]
Mary Horgan
[Signature]
Nathaniel Blome

Thomas S. DeBy
Sharon Sears
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On behalf of the Rutland City Board of Aldermen

CC: U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program