



Jay Inslee
Governor
State of Washington

November 20, 2015

Dear Senators,

I write to respond to your letter that questions the ability of our state to continue its proud tradition of welcoming refugees fleeing violence and oppression around the world.

I joined all Washingtonians in being shocked and horrified by the terrorist attacks that occurred in Paris last week. Those events, along with the recent attacks in Beirut, Mali, and elsewhere, demonstrate the need for continued vigilance in the fight against violent extremism, abroad and here at home. In the aftermath of these attacks, many residents in our state have quite understandably been afraid that the violence we have witnessed in these places could also affect our communities. I fully understand this fear. And I believe that the federal government must do everything within its power to protect the security of our nation and its citizens.

At the same time, I do not agree with the premise, unfortunately espoused by you and too many elected officials from other states, that our nation and our state should cease to welcome refugees fleeing oppression and conflict in other nations.

One part of your letter is in error and I hope you can correct it in a follow up to the media that received it and your press release. You state that in regards to refugees coming to the United States, "According to recent media reports, and statements you have made, Washington State will receive many of those refugees." I'm not sure which media reports you are referring to, but I have never made any such statements. I trust you will clear that up.

Your letter asks me to pause in allowing refugees into Washington and in representing Washington as a welcoming and compassionate state until the federal government's refugee screening process is understood. First and foremost, it is well understood that governors do not actually control whether refugees are allowed to enter their states. More importantly, I find it regrettable that you, as elected leaders, have not taken the time to understand this screening process and the rigorous steps that our federal government has in place to ensure the safety of American citizens. Instead, you have advocated that we turn from our proud tradition – dating to Republican Governor Dan Evans' welcoming refugees fleeing the Vietnam War – of receiving those who need our support and protection.

Refugees seeking resettlement in the United States must pass through a thorough screening process to ensure that they do not pose a security risk. Earlier this week I received a briefing on this thorough screening from senior federal officials from the White House, U.S. Departments of State, Homeland Security and Health & Human Services, and the FBI Counterterrorism Center. Here is how the very long process works:

First, any candidate seeking refugee status must meet certain criteria. Under U.S. law, a refugee is someone who has fled from his or her home country and cannot return because he or she has been persecuted or has a well-founded fear of persecution. Certain individuals of special humanitarian concern to the U.S. who are within their countries of nationality may also be considered as refugees eligible for admission to the U.S.

A refugee who meets the criteria for resettlement in the U.S. is typically only considered by the U.S. State Department Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) after a referral from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), or on occasion, a U.S. embassy or trained non-governmental organization. The UNHCR interviews the individual, examines their claim for refugee status, and probes for red flags and any ground for inadmissibility. Specifically, UNHCR personnel are trained to understand U.S. laws and national security requirements. Also important to note is that the UNHCR prioritizes referral to the U.S. individuals who are deemed to be the most vulnerable refugees, such as children and victims of torture.

Next, a State Department-contracted resettlement support center (RSC) researches and compiles the refugee's personal data and background information for the security clearance process. The RSC also interviews the individual and compiles data for presentation to the State Department and Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

A number of security checks are then conducted. The State Department runs the name and any aliases used by the individual through a standard Consular Lookout and Support System check (known as a "CLASS check"), which includes any criminal history, terrorism concerns, and immigration records, including any prior visa refusals. Enhanced interagency security checks were phased-in beginning in 2008, and applied to all refugee applicants by 2010.

The State Department also initiates an interagency examination, including the National Counter Terrorism Center and intelligence community, and a check of the federal government's Terrorist Screening Database. Certain refugees also undergo an additional security review, called a "Security Advisory Opinion" (SAO). These cases require a positive SAO clearance from a number of U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies in order to continue the screening and eventual resettlement process.

The State Department then refers the refugee applicant to the DHS Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). USCIS conducts its own interagency checks, using the refugee's fingerprints and other information, checked against databases from DHS, the FBI, intelligence agencies, and the Department of Defense.

All refugee applicants are then interviewed by a trained USCIS refugee affairs officer. These officers are trained in interview techniques and credibility assessments, and also in identifying fraudulent travel and identification documents. They're also able to submit documents to the DHS Immigration and Customs Enforcement's fraudulent document lab for closer scrutiny. Additionally, for applicants from Syria and Iraq, further refugee officer training is required. This officer will determine if the individual qualifies as a refugee and is admissible under U.S. law. Importantly, each case is reviewed by a DHS superior.

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Only after following these steps can USCIS conditionally approve the refugee's application for resettlement. Conditional approvals only become final once the results of all security checks have been received and cleared. Also important to know is that all refugee applicants approved for resettlement in the U.S. are required to undergo a medical screening, coordinated by the State Department.

Every refugee is then assigned to a federally-approved voluntary refugee resettlement agency in the U.S. These agencies will place refugees with a local partner agency or field office that will assist them upon their arrival in the U.S.

Prior to the refugee's arrival in the United States, the DHS Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) conducts its own vetting. Upon arrival at a designated U.S. port of entry, CBP officers will again review the refugee's documentation, interview them, and conduct additional security checks to ensure that they are the same person who was screened and approved for admission to the U.S.

As you can see, this process is a very thorough one. In fact, refugees seeking admission to the U.S. undergo the most intense security screening of any individual entering our country. This process can take time, as well. On average, the time between which a Syrian refugee has been referred to the USRAP by the UNHCR, to their eventual resettlement in this country, has been 18 to 24 months.

As you can see, governors play no role in the process.

Finally, as an attempt to argue against the security of any refugee screening processes in your letter you raise that one of the Paris murderers appears to have traveled from Syria. However, you should know that this terrorist did not go through anything like the screening process outlined above, which again, the United States uses for all refugees. Instead, according to DHS, this individual had merely identified himself as a refugee upon reaching the Greek border, and was allowed to proceed on, eventually reaching Paris. Such a faulty system, if one might call it that, has obviously resulted in tragedy across the Atlantic Ocean. But no one should confuse it for the rigorous system used by our federal government in the screening of every refugee seeking entrance into the United States.

My staff, and state agencies, are always open to answering any further questions you may have if you would like to better understand the refugee screening process, or any other information relating to our state's proud tradition of refugee resettlement.

Very truly yours,



Jay Inslee
Governor