Sen. Gounardes Joins Refugee Families and Advocates at Rally to Protect Refugee Services

ANDREW GOUNARDES   March 27, 2024

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The "I Heart Refugees" Act would codify New York's resettlement services to protect them from future administrations seeking to cut resources for refugees.

Video of the rally here.

Photos of the rally here.

Albany, NY - State Senator Andrew Gounardes, Assembly Member Nader Sayegh and other lawmakers joined refugee families and advocates from across New York State today to rally in support of the "I Heart Refugees" Act (S6070A/A69A).

The "I Heart Refugees" Act would codify New York's refugee services programs to protect them from future administrations seeking to cut resources and dismantle existing infrastructure for refugees, as then-President Trump did in 2019 when he issued Executive Orders placing resettlement programs at risk and setting record-low caps on the number of refugees accepted through the US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). These Executive Orders had a dramatic effect on refugee intake levels for years: in fiscal year 2016, the US accepted about 85,000 refugees. By fiscal year 2021, that number had shrunk to 6,300. They also required state and local governments to proactively provide written consent to the federal government in order for them to accept refugees, limiting the number of jurisdictions where refugees could be settled.

The Executive Orders were later struck down via judicial injunction. But refugee support systems remain vulnerable. USRAP's work is made possible through its partnerships with state resettlement agencies like New York's Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA). The office provides resettlement services, medical assistance, educational programming, case management, job training, and more to thousands of refugees each year. These services not only help displaced families achieve economic self-sufficiency, assist trafficking victims, and ensure proper care for unaccompanied minors—they also help refugees put down roots in New York, fueling the state's economic engine.

Despite OTDA's success settling thousands of new New York families, the program is under threat of future federal or state administrations, which could untie our state's commitment to USRAP with the stroke of a pen. The I Heart Refugees Act would codify these services into state law and make them a consistent part of the state's operations to ensure they support

New Yorkers for generations to come.

"For years, we've welcomed refugees from all over the world who are fleeing violence or insecurity in search of a better life for their family," said **State Senator Andrew Gounardes**. "The I Heart Refugees Act gets at the heart of what New York—and America—is all about. Our resettlement programs are already successfully welcoming new New Yorkers, helping them get the resources they need to be successful, and contribute to their new communities and our state's economy. This legislation would simply codify these services into law to ensure we continue to live up to the words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty by supporting all those yearning to breathe free."

"I wholeheartedly support the 'I Heart Refugees' Act which I proudly sponsored in the Assembly," said **State Assemblyman Nader Sayegh**. "I commend Senator Andrew Gournades for his leadership and compassion to codify New York's continued commitment to resettle hardworking and proud refugees from conflict and harsh conditions across the world. These new refugees often revitalize communities across our State. Truly a win-win for New York!"

"In the face of uncertainty, let our resolve stand as a shield, protecting the fundamental rights of those who seek refuge in our great state. The 'I Heart Refugees' Act is not merely legislation; it's a testament to our unwavering commitment to compassion, resilience, and the belief that every individual deserves a chance to rebuild their lives," said **State Senator Robert Jackson**. "By enshrining these services into law, we declare that in New York, our commitment to welcoming those in need transcends politics and administrations. Let history remember us not just as lawmakers, but as guardians of hope and architects of compassion."

"Refugee resettlement has been at the heart of Upstate New York's economic resurgence," said **State Senator Sean Ryan**. "In Buffalo, we have the refugee and immigrant community to

thank for the city's first population growth in 70 years. None of this would be possible without our local resettlement agencies, which rely on state funding to help New Americans integrate into our community and our economy. Codifying refugee programs at the state level would protect refugee resettlement from the whims of future administrations and keep these vital services funded in perpetuity."

"The 'I Heart Refugees' Act represents a crucial safeguard for refugee families in New York. It underscores our state's enduring commitment to compassion and resilience for those in need. By enshrining these services into law, we ensure ongoing support while also protecting refugee services from potential cuts and maintaining essential support for displaced families," said **Tina Lopez, Executive Director of the International Rescue Committee.**

"Codifying Refugee Resettlement, the I . Refugees Act, in New York State ensures that the great work we've been doing for decades will continue as long as there's a need," said **Kate Holmes, Director of Refugee Services Catholic Charities of Onondaga County**. "New York State has a tremendous history of being welcoming and this bill will allow resettlement agencies to continue welcoming refugees who are the fabric of our great state."
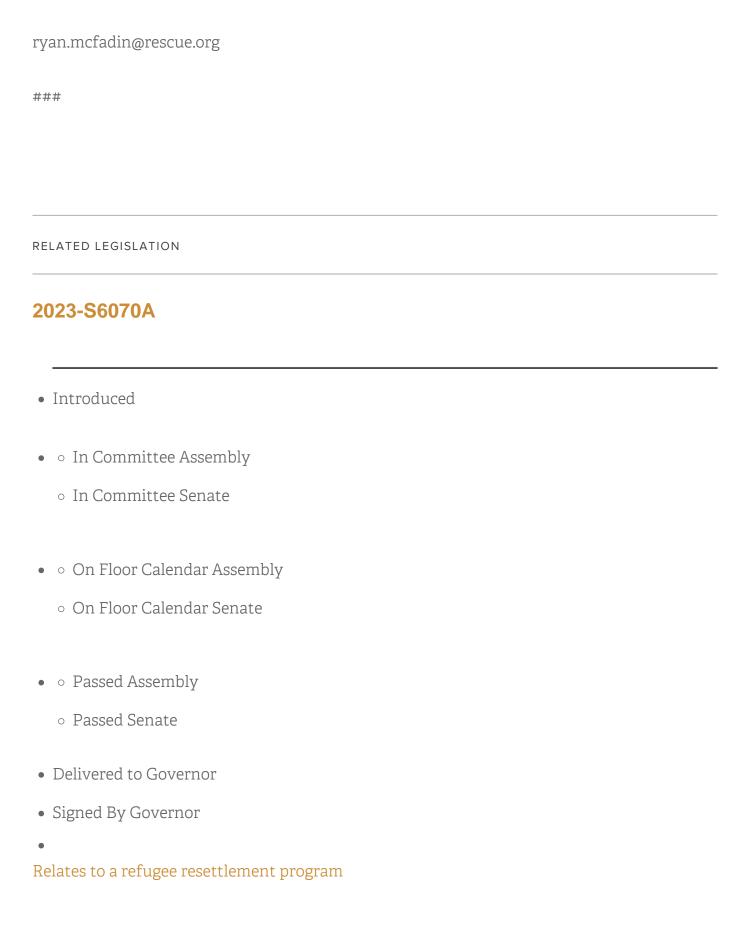
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RELATED LEGISLATION

2023-S6070A

- Introduced

- ○ In Committee Assembly

  ○ In Committee Senate

- ○ On Floor Calendar Assembly

  ○ On Floor Calendar Senate

- ○ Passed Assembly

  ○ Passed Senate

- Delivered to Governor

- Signed By Governor

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Relates to a refugee resettlement program

March 28, 2023

In Senate Committee Investigations and Government Operations

Sponsored by Andrew Gounardes