

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

October 12, 2023

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden:

As members of the Illinois congressional delegation, we urge you to take immediate action to address serious humanitarian needs in Illinois. The State of Illinois and the City of Chicago have dedicated unprecedented resources to the more than 18,000 asylum seekers who have traveled to Chicago from the U.S.-Mexico border since the start of Governor Abbott's partisan stunt, "Operation Lone Star," in August 2022.¹ State and local officials have worked tirelessly to serve these new arrivals, and the federal government must swiftly provide assistance and resources that reflect this Administration's commitment to safe, orderly, and humane immigration processes.

Government-Wide Resources and Coordination. State and local officials have stood up systems to provide asylum seekers with temporary housing, case management services, and essential health care. Illinois also must reckon with existing systemic inequities related to housing, safety, and other support services, which have been highlighted by the effort to support new arrivals.² For example, shelter has emerged as a significant challenge for the City of Chicago.³ A lack of affordable housing predates the recent arrivals of asylum seekers.⁴ Mayor Johnson recently announced plans to utilize city-owned vacant facilities as locations to support and shelter asylum seekers, but acquiring appropriate and available space has presented challenges.⁵

¹ Office of Governor JB Pritzker, *Letter to President Biden* (Oct. 2, 2023), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/118eGLcNevAK1I7eWG2yVVZsavBR9rS8e/view>; Office of the Mayor of Chicago, *Joint Letter From Mayor Brandon Johnson And Governor JB Pritzker Calling Upon The Federal Government To Streamline Work Authorization For Non-citizens When States Demonstrate A Public Benefit And Critical Workforce Shortages*, (Aug. 28, 2023) https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/mayor/press_room/press_releases/2023/august/JointLetterFromMayorBrandonJohnsonAndGovernorJBPritzkerStreamlineWorkAuthorization.html.

² Office of the Mayor, City of Chicago, *Executive Order No. 2023-16: Executive Order on Immigrant, Migrant, and Refugee Rights* (May 15, 2023) <https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/mayor/Press%20Room/Press%20Releases/2023/May/EO2023-16Immigration.pdf>

³ *As the number of migrants in Chicago tops 13,000, the city's struggle to provide housing continues*, NBC CHICAGO (Aug. 31, 2023), <https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/as-the-number-of-migrants-in-chicago-tops-13000-the-citys-struggle-to-provide-housing-continues/3218640/>

⁴ Richard Day and Alec Schwengler, *City Council has a real chance to tackle Chicago's housing crisis* (Jun. 2, 2023) <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-opinion-chicago-housing-crisis-adu-three-flat-20230602-cdsfnykx4ndndazxxxq627iqcq-story.html>.

⁵ Mariah Woelfel and Tessa Weinberg, *Here's what we know about Mayor Brandon Johnson's plan to set up migrant 'base camps'* WBEZ CHICAGO (Sep. 12, 2023) <https://www.wbez.org/stories/heres-what-we-know-about-mayor-brandon-johnsons-plan-to-set-up-migrant-base-camps/de02d287-dbf9-471d-8f2b-fe98f758d24>.

To this end, your Administration must identify additional federal mechanisms to alleviate the constraints on state and local resources, such as housing vouchers, rental assistance, transportation assistance, resources to support school enrollment and language access, and technical assistance to Chicago and Illinois. In addition, your Administration should assign a dedicated federal liaison for Illinois, tasked with coordinating federal agencies assisting state and local officials to address these needs, and serving as a single point of contact for these officials.

Streamlining work authorization for additional populations. In Illinois, several industries, such as food processing, clean energy, health care (including nursing and dentistry), transportation, and warehousing, are expected to have a significant number of job openings.⁶ If authorized to work, recently-arrived asylum seekers are ready to meet these important needs. We welcome the recent redesignation of Venezuela for Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which offers not only humanitarian protection for these nationals in the form of relief from removal but also the means to work legally while they remain in the United States.⁷ We urge you to consider additional streamlining measures to ease access to work permits, including a blanket fee exemption for work permit applicants who entered pursuant to an appointment with the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) One application and authorizing applicants who are prima facie eligible for TPS to work.⁸

Legal training for work permit applications. Reports have emerged that many noncitizens who are eligible to apply for work authorization have not yet done so.⁹ Although Chicago has a robust network of community-based legal service providers, its resources have been stretched thin in assisting asylum seekers with an application process that has been described as confusing or daunting.¹⁰ The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) recently updated its regulations for authorizing work permits.¹¹ We urge you to send DHS officials to Chicago to assist non-governmental organizations with navigating new processes and ensuring asylum seekers receive up-to-date information.

⁶ Office of the Mayor of Chicago, *Joint Letter From Mayor Brandon Johnson And Governor JB Pritzker Calling Upon The Federal Government To Streamline Work Authorization For Non-citizens When States Demonstrate A Public Benefit And Critical Workforce Shortages*, (Aug. 28, 2023) https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/mayor/press_room/press_releases/2023/august/JointLetterFromMayorBrandonJohnsonAndGovernorJBPritzkerStreamlineWorkAuthorization.html.

⁷ Department of Homeland Security, *Secretary Mayorkas Announces Extension and Redesignation of Venezuela for Temporary Protected Status* (Sept. 20, 2023), <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2023/09/20/secretary-mayorkas-announces-extension-and-redesignation-venezuela-temporary>.

⁸ INA § 244(a)(4).

⁹ Michael D. Shear, *White House Urges Eligible Immigrants to Apply for Work Permits* THE NEW YORK TIMES (Sep. 8, 2023) <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/08/us/politics/migrant-work-permits.html>

¹⁰ Jasmine Garsd, *There's a labor shortage in the U.S. Why is it so hard for migrants to legally work?* NPR (Aug. 29, 2023) <https://www.npr.org/2023/08/26/1195670024/theres-a-labor-shortage-in-the-u-s-why-is-it-so-hard-for-migrants-to-legally-wor>

¹¹ *See, e.g., Circumvention of Lawful Pathways*, 88 Fed. Reg. 31314 (May 11, 2023).

Coordination and Data Sharing. Governor Abbott has rebuffed any efforts by Chicago to coordinate between state or local governments, sometimes leaving asylum seekers to arrive on buses in the middle of the night with no local officials to receive them.¹² The recent death of a three year old placed on one of the buses has increased our concern about the treatment of families and children on such buses.¹³ Your Administration must ensure that CBP and entities funded by the federal government share information about asylum seekers with receiving localities. In addition, we urge you to take on coordination of information sharing and onward travel for asylum seekers, facilitating improved communication between CBP, non-governmental organizations at the border, and interior cities receiving asylum seekers. This information sharing will allow the safe and orderly receipt of migrants.

Improvements to the Shelter and Services Program. In addition, DHS's Shelter and Services Program (SSP) has been a crucial support mechanism for local communities supporting new arrivals. The new SSP grant program was established "to support CBP in effectively managing noncitizen processing and preventing the overcrowding of short-term CBP holding facilities."¹⁴ We appreciate DHS's request for an additional \$600 million for SSP in the FY23 budget supplemental to continue supporting border and interior communities receiving migrants.¹⁵ When allocating these resources, we urge you to consider the essential function that interior states like Illinois serve to decompress border facilities. To date, Illinois and Chicago have received roughly \$32 million in SSP funds—which has been insufficient to provide the support that local officials need to welcome asylum seekers.¹⁶ The gap has been filled through the hundreds of millions of dollars invested by both Illinois and Chicago. In addition, many asylum seekers remain in Illinois and receive services that allow them to integrate successfully into Illinois communities. DHS has interpreted statutory authorities to limit funding to those services provided to asylum seekers within the first 45 days of release from DHS custody,¹⁷ sometimes preventing Illinois officials from using SSP funds to complete the provision of initial services, such as intake and information collection. We urge you to allocate additional SSP funds to Illinois and Chicago and consider additional flexibilities to allow Illinois to use SSP funds for all initial services provided to asylum seekers.

¹² See, e.g., Kelly Bauer, *Texas Governor Is 'Sowing Chaos' By Sending Migrants To Chicago Without Helping Local Officials, Pritzker Says*, Block Club Chicago (Sept. 12, 2022), <https://blockclubchicago.org/2022/09/12/texas-governor-is-sowing-chaos-by-sending-migrants-to-chicago-without-helping-local-officials-pritzker-says/>.

¹³ William Melhado, *Child dies while en route to Chicago as part of Gov. Greg Abbott's migrant busing program*, Texas Tribune (Aug. 11, 2023), <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/08/11/child-death-border-custody/>.
<https://www.dhs.gov/news/2023/09/27/department-homeland-security-announces-distribution-more-12-million-funding>.

¹⁴ Congressional Research Service, *FEMA's Emergency Food and Shelter Program-Humanitarian Relief (EFSP-H) and the New Shelter and Services Program (SSP)* (Aug. 20, 2023) <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN12132>.

¹⁵ Department of Homeland Security, *Department of Homeland Security Announces Distribution of More Than \$12 Million in Funding for Communities Receiving Migrants* (Sept. 27, 2023),

¹⁶ Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Shelter and Service Program Awards* (Sept. 27, 2023), <https://www.fema.gov/grants/preparedness/shelter-services-program/awards>.

¹⁷ Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Fiscal Year 2023 Shelter and Services Program Fact Sheet* (Aug. 21, 2023) <https://www.fema.gov/grants/preparedness/shelter-services-program/fy-23-fact-sheet>

We appreciate your consideration and look forward to the opportunity to work with you to implement these measures.

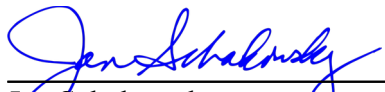
Sincerely,



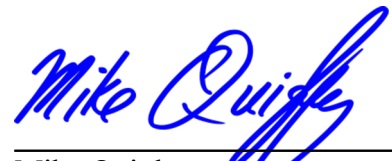
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United States Senator



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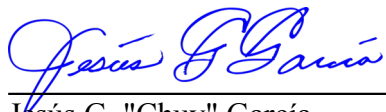
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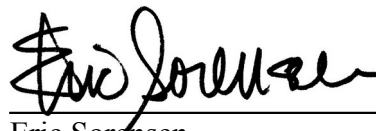
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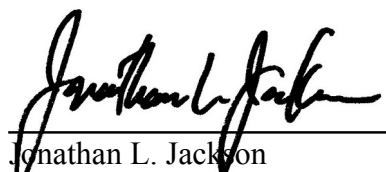
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