

## Global Refuge's Support for Council Bill 24-0584

October 23, 2024

Good afternoon,

My name is Krish O'Mara Vignarajah. I am the President and CEO of Global Refuge, and I am here today to testify in support of Bill 24-0584, which would codify Baltimore City's language access policy.

### **A. Introduction**

Global Refuge is the largest faith-based nonprofit dedicated to serving newcomers. We operate in 50 states and recently opened an office in Guatemala. As the President and CEO, I'm so proud that in 5 years we have grown from 70 to 750 employees with a budget today of over \$300 million today. We provide services in partnership with the federal government, resettling refugees and serving unaccompanied children, and facilitate programs and services for immigrants and New Americans including mental healthcare, legal services, financial literacy and employment skills, and job placement assistance. While our reach is national and international, our home is Maryland, specifically Baltimore, where we are celebrating our 25<sup>th</sup> year in the city. Our headquarters is based on Light Street, just steps from the Inner Harbor and right across from the Maryland Science Center; this year, we have also had the opportunity to expand our reach to provide more services for immigrants and refugees in the Baltimore area through the opening of our [Welcome Center](#) in Fells Point.

Since 1939, Global Refuge (formerly known as Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service) has provided welcome and hope to more than three quarters of a million refugees, transforming lives and empowering New Americans with support and resources to begin anew. Our history reflects our own deep immigrant roots and passionate commitment to welcoming newcomers, especially those who are most in need and we are proud to continue that work in Maryland and Baltimore. In the last year alone, with the help of our affiliates around the country, we resettled 18,622 refugees, including 1,178 in Maryland, and served 473 clients in Baltimore and the surrounding areas.

### **B. Support of Council Bill 24-0584**

Our mission at Global Refuge is to foster a world of just and welcoming communities. It is in this respect that I appear before you today to advocate for Council Bill 24-0584 and give our strong support to the efforts of the City of Baltimore to promote language access. Global Refuge supports Bill 24-0584 because: (1) Bill 24-0584 ensures Baltimore's response to a growing national need of language access for Limited English Proficient (LEP) communities that are increasingly providing urban city environments with renewed economic growth and vitality; (2) language access helps ensure integration and self-sufficiency and is a helpful tool to aid

businesses and efficient hiring and (3) elements of Bill 24-0584 will improve certain barriers that our immigrants and refugees experience.

*(1) Bill 24-0584 Will Ensure That Baltimore Is Responsive to Growing National Need*

There are federal requirements for language access, but increasingly, demographics are making the case for language access needs at the state and local level. Bill 24-0584 helps ensure that Baltimore will continue to benefit from immigrant and refugee growth by ensuring immigrants' and refugees' inclusion in city activity and, as appropriate, in civic life.

Under the federal government, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964<sup>1</sup> and Executive Order 13166 (titled, “Improving Access to Services by Persons with Limited English Proficiency<sup>2</sup>”) both provide the framework for federal requirements on language access. The requirements for language access at the state, city and local level, however, are less pronounced—despite tremendous demographic changes in the United States. For example, according to the 2019 American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau, 41.8 million people aged five or older speak Spanish at home, more than twice as many as in 1990.<sup>3</sup> About 22.6 percent of schoolchildren nationally do not speak English at home.<sup>4</sup> In 2019, only 12 U.S. states updated court procedural rules and other policies to assure compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and other laws and executive orders concerning language access.<sup>5</sup> The national need for language access was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which language access issues in health care abounded, as hospitals struggled to treat sick patients with limited English proficiency who didn't always have access to interpreters.

Population shifts in Baltimore mirror national trends, demonstrating a greater need for language access. From 2010 to 2019, the number of speakers of other languages in Baltimore grew from 52,594 (9% of the population 5 years of age and older) to 56,188 (almost 10% of the total population 5 years of age and older).<sup>6</sup> While that growth may seem modest, the City's overall population declined by approximately 20,000 people during that same period.<sup>7</sup> This parallels national trends: Immigration reinvigorates urban areas and mitigates population loss, bolstering the workforce and support the economy for generations to follow. To enhance the positive impact of immigrant communities on Baltimore and further mitigate population loss, Baltimore

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<sup>1</sup> Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects individuals from discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin in programs that receive federal financial assistance, and national origin has been interpreted to include language. Failure to ensure that persons who do not speak English very well, or are “limited English proficient,” can effectively participate in, or benefit from, federally assisted programs may violate Title VI's prohibition against discrimination based on national origin.

<sup>2</sup> In 2000, President Bill Clinton issued [Executive Order 13166](#), titled, “Improving Access to Services by Persons with Limited English Proficiency,” Executive Order 13166 requires federal agencies to assess and address the needs of otherwise eligible persons seeking access to federally conducted programs and activities who, due to their limited English proficiency, cannot fully and equally participate in or benefit from those programs and activities.

<sup>3</sup> Why Language Access Matters, Background: Key Figures, Language Access Matters, available at <https://languageaccess.org/background-why-language-access-matters/> (accessed 10/21/24).

<sup>4</sup>*Id.*

<sup>5</sup>*Id.*

<sup>6</sup>ISpeak Baltimore, Language Access Toolkit [Demographic Data | Language Access Toolkit \(baltimorecity.gov\)](#) (accessed 10/21/24).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

city agencies can make Baltimore an even more welcoming city by providing language access services.

*(2) Language Access Helps Ensure Integration and Self Sufficiency and Is a Helpful Tool to Aid Businesses*

In our work at Global Refuge, we serve immigrants and refugees daily in a variety of state, local, urban, suburban, and rural settings. Our work involves ensuring individuals are primed to successfully integrate into the United States and develop the skills, or utilize existing skills, to ensure economic independence, family and community cohesion, and a dignified life free of persecution or danger. Ensuring that immigrants and refugees can access important information about benefits, services and compliance requirements is a key part of the integration process. We note with positivity the growing inclusive approach of federal agencies with respect to language access, most notably the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Language Access Plan, which was released in November 2023.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to what we've seen from federal agencies such as DHS, we have found growing recognition of the need to address language access from the business community. Businesses are increasingly realizing that immigrant and refugee workers can contribute to businesses even while they are learning the local language. Companies can gain a competitive advantage in the global economy by expanding their talent pipelines to fill open roles, increasing language diversity within their workforces, expanding the markets they can serve, growing the products they can offer, and better representing customers and communities.<sup>9</sup>

By implementing solutions that help overcome language barriers for immigrant and refugee talent, companies can unlock hidden value for their businesses and support the economic integration of their workers. At Global Refuge, I have seen this firsthand through the work of our [Preferred Refugee Employers \(PRE\) Program](#), an innovative program that connects employers with refugees ready and wanting to work in their community. Through the PRE program, we have connected both national and local employers to refugees for long-term legal work opportunities. One of the main draws of the program is the ability to communicate and tap into a new workforce, refugees, who may be underutilized in the community, due to a lack of access and a lack of engagement. The program includes English as a Second Language (ESOL) classes and encourages employers to hire individuals who may speak both the language of the prospective refugee workers and English. Through these initiatives, we have seen the importance and value of language access as well as its positive impact on both refugees and newcomers' employment prospects and on the businesses that employ them.

*(3) Bill 24-0584 Will Help to Eliminate Certain Barriers Immigrants and Refugees Experience*

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<sup>8</sup>U.S. Department of Homeland Security Language Access Plan November 2023 available at [https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2023-11/23\\_1115\\_dhs\\_updated-language-access-plan.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2023-11/23_1115_dhs_updated-language-access-plan.pdf) (accessed 10/21/24).

<sup>9</sup>Bridging Language & Work Solutions to Invest in Immigrant and Refugee Talent, Tent.org, February 2022, available at [https://www.tent.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Tent\\_BridgingLanguageWork\\_2.7.22.pdf](https://www.tent.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Tent_BridgingLanguageWork_2.7.22.pdf) (accessed 10/21/24).

Through our work at the Global Refuge Baltimore Welcome Center in Fells Point and with Baltimore Department of Social Services (DSS), we have seen language access create barriers or unnecessary interventions that can make accessing services in Baltimore difficult for immigrants and refugees. For example, currently, DSS has no way of tracking which local Baltimore city office or department is not implementing language access and translation services. Instead, the reporting on whether a department is providing such services comes from clients or community-based organizations. The language proposed by Bill 24-0584 helps to clarify which city department will be required to submit language access plans and have a relevant point of contact. Additionally, Bill 24-0584 will help ensure compliance by the requirement of an annual report and review. This will provide clarity on when clients can realistically expect translation services as well as documents and website information in other languages besides English. Additionally at our Baltimore Welcome Center, clients frequently struggle to access and attend medical appointments independently due to language barriers, and health clinics can be inconsistent in providing interpretation services, particularly for dental appointments. This makes it difficult for individuals to independently attend such medical appointments and requires staff to attend and take more time to assist which could be devoted to other clients and services. As Bill 24-0584 will provide more information and services available in designated citywide languages, we believe this will lead to greater self-independence, predictability of experience and integration of immigrants and refugees into Baltimore.

### **C. Conclusion**

I urge you to favorably approve Bill 24-0584 to the Baltimore City Council, to ensure that our immigrant residents and communities continue to be represented in Baltimore City government and ensure all Baltimore City residents have equitable access to the City's essential services and vital information. We look forward to working with you to help implement this important policy and collaborate to the extent possible to continue welcoming, accompanying and integrating immigrants and refugees into our vibrant community.

Thank you for your time and consideration.