



**GEORGIA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE**  
ARCHDIOCESE OF ATLANTA · DIOCESE OF SAVANNAH

## **Statement of Catholic Bishops of Georgia Regarding Unaccompanied Minor Children and Refugee Families**

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The plight of people migrating because of oppression arouses our compassion particularly when those migrants and refugees include so many children and young families. As pastors, we are deeply moved by the rapidly increasing number of children unaccompanied by parents or guardians as well as parents with young children who have fled their homes in Central America to seek refuge within the borders of the United States.

In the light of the Gospel and Catholic tradition, we recognize the face of Christ in each migrating person and we must respond to these poor and vulnerable people just as we would to Jesus, who, from the first days of His life, became a migrant fleeing violence in His homeland. We acknowledge the inherent God-given dignity of every human being, particularly children and other vulnerable people.

The Catholic Church in the United States has welcomed immigrants and has, truly, been built up by immigrants. We have no doubt that those seeking security and opportunity in the United States today will bestow the benefits of their work on our nation in the future.

The Catholic Church views immigration through the lens of the Gospel. We also analyze the effect of immigration policy on individual persons and families, based on the work of Catholic organizations in Central America and the work and advocacy on behalf of migrants in our dioceses. We also listen to our fellow bishops and their diocesan workers in these countries, who have long identified the violence and extreme poverty as issues that have culminated in many young people traveling toward the United States and other neighboring countries. They have identified violence as the primary driver of recent flows of unaccompanied children and families. A delegation from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops recently visited some of these countries and confirmed this fact, witnessing firsthand the life threatening conditions that compel families to leave their homes or send their children on the perilous road to the United States to find a safer and more dignified life.

We also speak as the largest provider of refugee resettlement services in the United States and as a large provider of immigration and refugee resettlement services in Georgia through Catholic Charities. In FY 2013, Catholic Charities Atlanta resettled 276 refugees from countries including Iraq, Iran, Bhutan, Burma, Cuba, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia.

Catholic teaching has long supported the principle that every person has the right to live in his or her homeland with security and with opportunities for living a life of dignity with opportunities for work. Yet, the right to security and human dignity may also compel individuals to migrate to other lands, when we must welcome them. Writing about the unaccompanied minors from Central America, Pope Francis offered the essential benchmark: “This humanitarian emergency



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requires, as a first urgent measure, these children be welcomed and protected.” (Papal message on the occasion of “Mexico/Holy See colloquium on human migration and development” July 14, 2014).

**Federal and State Officials**

As bishops in Georgia, we call on national and state legislators and government officials of all political parties to put aside partisanship and seek solutions that will enhance the humanity of these children and families.

We join our brother bishops across the country in seeking federal legislation that includes the following principles:

- Preserve the protections of the bipartisan Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act passed in 2008 which gives due process rights to children fleeing violence.
- Support supplemental funding for the care and protection of vulnerable unaccompanied children while keeping intact funding for current refugee resettlement programs. Refugee resettlement funding directly affects the services that Catholic Charities Atlanta has been providing.
- Additional appropriations are needed for judges and lawyers who can fairly adjudicate the asylum claims of children as required by law. These appropriations should not adversely affect other immigration programs as suggested by some in the Administration and in Congress.
- Provide support to address the root causes of poverty and violence in Central American countries. USCCB Migration and Refugee Services, Catholic Relief Services, Jesuit Refugee Services and other Catholic agencies have long been aware of the problems in Central America and the factors that push migration from those countries. They have, thus, been using what resources they have to address these overwhelming problems but private charities cannot fully solve government problems.
- Support the use of community-based alternatives to detention for families and oppose the construction of detention centers for this vulnerable population.

We also urge Congress to enact comprehensive immigration reform legislation, which will help fix our broken immigration system.

We strongly encourage you to support these principles by contacting your U.S. senators and congress members through the Catholic bishops’ [Justice for Immigrants website](#).

On the State level, we ask legislators and officials to support policies that enhance the dignity of all people who come to our state.

**Direct Local Help**

We call on the Catholic people of Georgia to support these public policies and to also seek opportunities to welcome and serve these migrating young sisters and brothers through parish, civic and national organizations.



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In our parishes, we must first pray for those living in dangerous conditions throughout the world and for all those who courageously leave their homes seeking security and opportunities for themselves and their children. Pray also for government leaders that they will develop just and humane policies for all. Pope Francis' universal prayer intention for August is: "That refugees, forced by violence to abandon their homes, may find a generous welcome and the protection of their rights."

The plight of refugee children directly affects us in Georgia. According to government statistics, just over 37, 000 children have been released throughout the United States in the first seven months of 2014 and 1,412 (ninth highest in the nation) of them have been released to relatives in Georgia. We recognize that the government cannot release the names or locations of the children but certainly many of these children are living in our parishes today and will be looking to our parishes for help.

As children and refugee families move into Georgia, St. Vincent de Paul conferences and parish charities will have increased needs. Catholic Charities Atlanta should also be considered along with the national charities such as [Catholic Charities USA](#) or [USCCB Migration and Refugee Services](#)

**Effective: September 18, 2014**

**Approved:**

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**The Most Reverend Wilton D. Gregory,**  
S.L.D.  
*Archbishop of Atlanta*

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