

Statement of

The Honorable Russ Feingold

United States Senator
Wisconsin
September 21, 2004

Senator Russell D. Feingold
Statement for the Record for Immigration Subcommittee of the Judiciary Committee on
"Refugees: Seeking Solutions to a Global Concern"
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I am proud of this country's tradition of welcoming refugees. Since its creation, the United States has served as a safe haven for those fleeing abuse and persecution. My own state of Wisconsin has welcomed thousands of refugees, including Lao-Hmong, Somali Bantus, Afghans, Azerbaijanis, Bosnians, Burmese, Liberians, Russians, Rwandans, Sierra Leoneans, Ukrainians and more. They have fled their countries for reasons of political and religious persecution, genocide, civil war and other horrors. Yet, despite the hardships they have encountered, they have enriched and influenced the lives of so many in Wisconsin.

Wisconsin's largest refugee group is the Hmong from Laos. Over 47,000 Hmong live in Wisconsin, the third largest Hmong population in the United States. The Hmong-Lao fought alongside the CIA in Laos during the Vietnam War, providing critical assistance to U.S. forces. After the fall of Saigon, thousands of Hmong fled Laos and its communist Pathet Lao government. Hmong-Lao have made tremendous strides since their arrival in the United States. According to the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, Hmong home ownership rates exceed 50%. They pay taxes, have opened businesses and are contributing members to Wisconsin's communities.

Recently, the US government opened a refugee program for approximately 15,000 Hmong-Lao to resettle in the United States from Wat Tham Krabok, a temple in Thailand. Some have already begun to arrive, and Wisconsin is expecting over 3,000 refugees. Wisconsites have shown their generosity to these arriving refugees through donations of furniture, household items, and monetary assistance. They have organized working groups, such as the Refugee Welcome Project in Wausau, to plan for the refugees arrival and transition to life in Wisconsin. They have shown up at the airport, holding signs and handing out carnations and balloons to newly arriving refugees. The Hmong-Lao who arrived in previous resettlement programs have been especially instrumental in assisting this new wave of refugees by opening their homes and providing translation services. I am honored to represent those who have reached out to these people in need, and I believe that this country must remain committed to our tradition of welcoming refugees.

I hope that this hearing will address the following pressing questions. What steps is the administration taking to standardize the refugee program, so that there is greater transparency

and predictability for refugees, their friends and families, and the communities in which they will resettle? How will the administration provide needed resources in a more expedited fashion to communities who receive refugees unexpectedly? How will the administration identify refugee groups to resettle in FY 2005 and 2006? Will the administration take more refugee referrals outside of UNHCR, or will they continue to rely heavily on UNHCR?

It is essential that we get this program right. I hope to work further with the administration, Congress and concerned organizations on this important issue.