

Members of Congress and Refugee Organizations Commemorate 75 Years of the Refugee Convention with Call to Protect the Right to Seek Safety

July 23, 2026

Washington, D.C. — Jesuit Refugee Service USA, together with Refugee Council USA (RCUSA), Human Rights First, Church World Service, Women's Refugee Commission, HIAS, the Center for Gender & Refugee Studies, and Refugee Congress, hosted Members of Congress, Congressional staff, advocates, and the public to commemorate the signing of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The Convention establishes international standards to protect those forced to flee conflict and persecution, and sets foundational promises by governments regarding their protection.

Throughout the event, speakers reflected on the importance of bipartisan support for refugees and the lifesaving, ever-important work of UNHCR. **Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL)**, who co-hosted the event, said: "[During my time in the Senate] I tried my best to stand up for populations that were not popular at the time – whether they were immigrants to the United States, or refugees to our shores – because it reflects on who we are as much as who they are. Their desperate need is calling on us to respond with caring hearts. I hope we return to that feeling soon, I hope it's done on a bipartisan basis, and I think it will be."

Representative Don Bacon (R-NE), who also co-hosted the event, spoke about what has moved him to support refugee protection and resettlement and recounted the story of a Vietnamese refugee that his family took into their home when he was 13 years old: "Here's a guy who came here, [age] 24, one suitcase, couldn't speak English, and he achieved the American dream; he worked hard, and he provided a value in Buffalo NY. That's the American dream, that's what people want to come here for."

Participants also heard remarks from co-hosts **Senator Mazie Hirono (D-HI)**, **Representative Mary Gay Scanlon (D-PA)**, and **Representative Jamie Raskin (D-MD)**, each emphasizing the importance for Congress and the administration to advance policies that protect the right to seek asylum, rebuild and strengthen the US Refugee Admissions Program, and demonstrate US leadership in responding to global displacement.

Following remarks from congressional leaders, a panel of four refugees shared their personal stories of resilience and highlighted the life-changing impact of refugee protection and resettlement as well as the rich contributions refugees make to the US as their new home country. Panelists called for continued investment in welcoming communities, access to education, and the resources refugees need to rebuild their lives and give back to their new communities.

Nam Loc Nguyen, a refugee who fled Vietnam and arrived to the US in the mid-1970s, spoke about how the protection he received has motivated him to pay it forward: "Because I was personally blessed by [the] compassion [of the visionaries of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Refugee Act of 1980], I have always believed that I have a responsibility to extend that same compassion to those who come after us...In August 2021, when I watched the last evacuation flight depart Kabul, Afghanistan, I felt as though I were reliving the painful memories of April 1975. Soon afterward, together with Vietnamese refugee communities across the United States, we raised funds, organized community sponsorship groups, and helped nearly one hundred Afghan refugees resettle in communities across the country."

The event reflected our nation's long standing and historic commitment to protecting those most vulnerable. Together, we reaffirmed our nation's solemn promise to uphold the principles of the Refugee Convention for generations to come.