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**Jewish Community
Relations Council**

MILWAUKEE
JEWISH FEDERATION

Policy Position on Syrian Refugee Crisis

Guided by our history as refugees and our shared biblical and prophetic mandate to protect and welcome the stranger, the American Jewish community has always been a stakeholder in refugee resettlement and protection. In the U.S. and in other countries, we have offered new beginnings, including helping to welcome more than three million refugees who arrived in the U.S. for resettlement since the enactment of the Refugee Act of 1980.

Refugees are persons who cannot return to their countries of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of who they are or what they believe. The most staggering refugee situation today is the crisis stemming from Syria's civil war, now in its fifth year. There are an estimated four million Syrian refugees who have fled their country and eight million people who are internally displaced within the country. These people have faced horrific violence and persecution, creating the worst refugee crisis since World War II.

The countries bordering Syria – primarily Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey – are struggling with the challenges of hosting large numbers of refugees, while some countries are preventing refugees from entering. Refugees in host countries face inadequate housing and food, limited access to medical and psychological care, and lack of educational opportunities. The scope of the crisis is so vast that it threatens to destabilize the entire region as deteriorating conditions in countries of first asylum are causing secondary mass displacements.

The United States has provided significant funding to assist Syrian refugees, but it is not enough to meet the growing needs. With the largest and most sophisticated refugee resettlement program in the world, the U.S. can and should do more to help the many victims of the Syrian civil war.

Like the many Jewish refugees and other immigrants who arrived in the United States and became a vibrant part of our national community, resettled refugees have a historical track record of embracing American values and boosting the economies of the communities where they settle.

In the wake of attacks in Paris, Beirut and around the world by Daesh and other Islamic extremist groups, Americans must balance our moral responsibility to provide safe harbor with our concern for national security. While most refugees are innocent victims, security concerns

are real and serious. We cannot ignore the potential of terrorists to exploit the refugee crisis. A vigorous and careful screening process is necessary to protect those already living in this country.

We cannot, however, accept the demonization and fear of the “other” that has become common rhetoric in talking about refugees. The notion of religious tests for refugees or registration of those from certain countries is repugnant. Calls to close our borders to asylum seekers are a stark betrayal of American and Jewish values. Partisan politics and xenophobia have no place in this debate. We cannot allow hatred and fear to determine policy; we must be motivated by aspirations of freedom and tolerance. America has the creativity and compassion to successfully address competing considerations.

The Jewish Community Relations Council of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation calls on:

- The international community to respond to the current Syrian refugee process. This must include contributing significant aid and utilizing refugee resettlement resources to save lives and share responsibility with countries of first asylum. These countries must strengthen their ability to host refugees and ensure that proper resources are allocated to provide services to both citizens and asylum seekers.
- The United States to increase the number of refugees it will accept and the funds necessary to provide adequate screening and resettlement. Refugees must be treated with dignity, compassion, and respect.
- Congress and the Executive Branch to undertake a sensible and careful review of the screening program for refugees. The process under which individuals can enter the U.S. on tourist, student, and work visas must likewise be reviewed.
- Wisconsin’s governor and legislators to support and facilitate refugee resettlement.
- All citizens to speak out when others, including community, religious and political leaders label refugees with hateful or xenophobic invective. We must not tolerate attempts to segregate, label, or discriminate against persons on the basis of their religion. Nor can we acquiesce in the calls for monitoring or limitations on places of worship merely due to their religious affiliation.

The United States and State of Wisconsin should not turn their backs on innocent victims escaping oppression and seeking freedom. This is a bedrock American ideal and part of the legacy of the Jewish people.