April 14, 2022

The Honorable Senator Alex Padilla
112 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Padilla,

The San Diego Housing Commission (SDHC) urges Congress to establish a rental housing voucher program to help thousands of refugees from Ukraine and Afghanistan find new rental homes of their own in communities, including the City of San Diego, that already have highly competitive rental markets. This type of assistance is essential to prevent homelessness among newly arriving refugees in communities across the country already experiencing a homelessness crisis.

The housing assistance program that helped families in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the Emergency Housing Voucher (EHV) program launched through the American Rescue Plan Act in response to the COVID-19 pandemic provide models for the creation of a refugee housing voucher program. This two-year program would provide resources and time-limited assistance to help refugees secure housing and begin to stabilize their lives in the United States. Funding for housing placement assistance, such as security deposits and application fees, is also necessary to enable refugees to obtain housing.

The federal Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP) was implemented in 2007 to help households that had been affected by hurricanes Katrina and Rita two years earlier. DHAP helped thousands of households transition from temporary Federal Emergency Management Agency housing assistance to longer-term housing without ongoing federal assistance. The report “Study of Household Transition From the Disaster Housing Assistance Program” details the elements of the program and how it assisted households. The requirement to provide case management, including housing search assistance, to all participating households and the gradual decline in rental assistance to help households become self-sufficient, with hardship exemptions as needed, are among the elements of DHAP that could be replicated effectively in a refugee housing voucher program.

The EHV program helps those who are experiencing homelessness; are at risk of experiencing homelessness; are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or human trafficking; or who recently experienced homelessness and for whom rental
assistance will help prevent their homelessness or a high risk of housing instability. The EHV program includes “services fee” funding to provide housing search assistance and housing placement assistance for participating households. Funding for these types of assistance, as well as helping households pay their rent, should be part of a refugee housing voucher program as well.

In six months, from October 2021 through March 2022, approximately 2,500 Afghan refugees arrived in the San Diego region, according to data provided by Catholic Charities, Diocese of San Diego, which is one of four San Diego refugee resettlement agencies. Catholic Charities further estimates that nearly 3,000 Ukrainians entered Tijuana, Mexico, between April 3, 2022, and April 6, 2022, with the intent of entering the United States, and about 14 percent of them, or approximately 420, do not have housing plans, such as a point of contact or family member, after they enter the United States. As these thousands of refugees search for housing in the highly competitive San Diego market, they often lack the necessary credit history and U.S. employment history. A short-term refugee housing voucher program could help them overcome these and additional challenges.

SDHC deeply respects the hard work of both the U.S. State Department and nonprofits that are assisting with the resettlement of Afghan and Ukrainian refugees; however, a refugee housing voucher program is needed to provide longer-term housing solutions.

SDHC’s expertise in administering rental assistance programs makes us well-suited to administer rental housing vouchers through this program for Afghan and Ukrainian refugees in the City of San Diego. As one of only 39 original “Moving to Work” agencies out of approximately 3,200 public housing authorities nationwide, SDHC has developed innovative special programs to provide housing assistance to households with low income or experiencing homelessness in the City of San Diego. These include our Landlord Partnership Program and Landlord Engagement and Assistance Program (LEAP), through which SDHC provides incentives and additional support to attract and retain landlords in the private market who rent to rental assistance participants or families experiencing homelessness. SDHC administers ongoing federal Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher rental assistance for families with low income or experiencing homelessness. SDHC receives funding to help a baseline of 16,334 households pay their rent. Through administrative efficiencies and programs SDHC has implemented, the agency provided rental assistance to more than 19,300 households during Fiscal Year 2021. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, SDHC has made payments totaling more than $194.8 million in approximately one year to pay rent and utilities for more than 16,800 households with low income experiencing financial hardship due to or during the pandemic. The San Diego Refugee Communities Coalition is one of the community-based organizations SDHC has been working with through our COVID-19 Housing Stability Assistance Program to provide this emergency rental assistance. SDHC also administers the EHV program, with 459, or 96 percent, of the 480 vouchers awarded to SDHC either leased up (298) or issued to a household currently looking for housing (161).

SDHC looks forward to the opportunity to help Afghan and Ukrainian refugees obtain long-term, stable housing as they transition to life in the United States. This also aligns with our mission—to foster social and economic stability for vulnerable populations in the City of San Diego through quality, affordable housing; opportunities for financial self-reliance; and homelessness solutions.
Thank you for your leadership and your consideration of this important issue.

Sincerely,

Jeff Davis
Interim President & Chief Executive Officer
San Diego Housing Commission