

Roger Hanshaw  
The Speaker of the House of Delegates  
Room 228M, Building 1  
State Capitol Complex  
Charleston, WV 25305

Dear Mr. Speaker:

We, the undersigned West Virginia civic and religious leaders, write with one voice to stand against any laws that attack immigrants, who make our state a better place every day. Our West Virginia is a welcoming, warm home. We embrace the diversity immigrants bring to our state, and we reject any attempts to demonize or degrade immigrant communities in the Mountain State. We are alarmed by a rash of bills that have been introduced into the legislature this session targeting immigrants, including HB 2067, HB 2808, HB 2664, and HB 2685. We write to encourage you to do everything in your power to ensure that none of these outrageous attacks on our neighbors becomes law.

Though West Virginia has one of the smallest immigrant populations in the country, its impact is mighty. Despite the small number of immigrants, our state is home to more than 2,500 immigrant owned businesses that generated \$47.6 million in 2014, and though they make up only 1.6% of our state population, they make up 4.5% of the state's business owners. That means immigrants in West Virginia are 2.8 times more likely to start a business than U.S.-born people. Immigrants in West Virginia are also 2.5 times more likely to have a college degree than non-immigrants, resulting in 28.4% of foreign-born workers in West Virginia earning more than \$75,000, compared to 15.5% of U.S.-born workers. Immigrants make a huge difference for the economy and fiscal health of our state. In 2016, immigrant-led households in West Virginia paid \$187 million in federal taxes and \$76.3 million in state and local taxes.

West Virginia is a state facing unprecedented demographic challenges. We are the only state in the country with both negative natural growth (births minus deaths) and net migration loss. We have one of the oldest populations of any state, the highest death rate, and one of the lowest birth rates in the country. As we face the inevitable strain on our workforce and entitlement programs from an aging population across the country, refugees and immigrants can help lessen this, as over 70 percent of immigrants and refugees are working-age, compared to just 49.7 percent of the U.S.-born population.

Despite the incredibly positive impact of our immigrant community, a climate of fear and bigotry has led to a push to alienate refugees and other immigrants and keep them out of our state and our country. Currently, four bills have been introduced to that WV legislature that stand in direct opposition to the welcoming state we claim to be and ignore the very real challenges we face as a state.

HB 2067 and HB 2808 are so-called "anti-sanctuary city" bills. HB 2067 would require counties and municipalities to enforce federal immigration law to the greatest extent permissible under law. HB 2808 would prohibit government entities from preventing local enforcement of federal immigration law. These bills undermine our constitutional rights and makes our communities less safe. Everyone's rights, including U.S. citizens, would be harmed by these bill. By forcing or encouraging local police to enforce federal immigration law, the state would undermine public safety and create a pretext for racial and

ethnic profiling. Not only do these bills disregard our economic challenges, they would impose significant costs on local governments, costing tens of thousands of dollars for each lawsuit, requiring local jails to hold more people for longer periods of time without reimbursement, and requiring costly training that would take time away from local law enforcement's important job of keeping their communities safe. Indeed, when local law enforcement becomes entangled in federal immigration enforcement, it actually harms public safety. Police know from experience that trust between immigrant communities and police is undermined when police are believed to be working with federal immigration officials. And immigrant witnesses and victims are less likely to report crimes and helpful intelligence, whether or not they themselves have legal status, for fear that they or their family members will be questioned, detained, or deported.

Anti-refugee bills HB 2664 and HB 2685 would both undermine West Virginia values by asserting the belief that discrimination is acceptable, that freedom for some should be circumscribed, and that hospitality will not be granted to refugees. These bills perpetuate the notion that refugee resettlement is a problem and focus on the perceived costs rather than the benefits to the state. Based on an irrational fear of people whose ethnicity, skin color, and/or religion may not be dominant in the United States, these discriminatory bills seek to stigmatize people who have survived war and persecution. There is virtually no refugee resettlement in West Virginia, making the concerns leading to this bill entirely hypothetical. To be introducing such legislation when there are no plans or ability to resettle refugees is both a waste of time and shows a profound ignorance of the reality of how refugees are even resettled.

HB 2685 would require the collection and dissemination of significant information about refugees living in the state, including sensitive information, such as personal health information and their income history. Of all categories of immigrants admitted to the United States, refugees are the most screened and vetted, with the security screening process normally taking anywhere from 18-24 months, and in many cases, much longer and involving several departments and agencies within the U.S. government. There is no more difficult way to be admitted to the United States than as a refugee. Refugees also receive a medical examination prior to traveling to the United States, and those with communicable diseases cannot enter the United States until they undergo treatment and completely recover. This bill is a duplicative waste of resources and is wholly unnecessary.

HB 2664 would attempt to give the state of West Virginia power over the resettlement of refugees including the power to declare when "absorptive capacity" has been met or exceeded and the power to suspend resettlement. These are not powers that properly belong to any state's government. Under the doctrine of preemption, states cannot adopt a policy that explicitly contradicts federal policy, and any attempt to assert such a power is preempted under federal law. Even if HB 2664 were adopted, the state of West Virginia cannot prevent refugees from choosing to live within its borders. The right to move about freely is robustly protected by the Constitution and may not be restricted by the government. This right extends to refugees and non-citizens, particularly in light of international treaties to which the United States is a signatory. For these reasons, adversarial local governments or individual civil servants may see these bills as a license to discriminate, making West Virginia vulnerable to costly legal challenges.

West Virginia needs to live up to its values and be the welcoming place to all that it should be. Immigrants are a boon to the West Virginia economy and add to our state in a multitude of ways. We

desperately need more immigrants in West Virginia and we are in no position to turn away people who want to come to our state. Not only do they bring a profound economic impact, but refugees and newcomers bring diversity of population, minds, ideas, and business to the area.

That is the American dream and why America continues to thrive. Refusing to recognize the positive impact of immigrants on communities that welcome them is profoundly shortsighted. This type of policymaking plays into irrational fears that have no basis in fact.

The truth is that immigrants have always been and continue to be a vital part of West Virginia culture and the economy. We must not pass laws that make immigrants feel unwelcome. West Virginia must reject these bills to demonstrate that our state treasures the values of equality, freedom, and hospitality. We hope and expect you will do everything in your power to ensure that these reprehensible bills do not become law.

Sincerely,

Father Andy Switzer

Pastor Paula Napier

Ravi Isaiah, DMin, LPC, Director of Chaplaincy,  
Charleston Area Medical Center

Rabbi Jean Eglinton

Rabbi Joe Hample

Rabbi Victor Urecki

Rev. Chris Mullett

Rev. D.D. Meighen

Rev. Dr. Wes Bergen

Rev. Cindy Briggs-Biondi

Rev. Jim Lewis

Rev. Kay Ann Albright

Rev. Marquita L. Hutchens

Rev. Mel Hoover

Rev. Rose Edington

American Civil Liberties Union of West Virginia

American Friends Service Committee

CARE Coalition

Covenant House

Eastern Panhandle Pride

Fairness West Virginia

Greater Morgantown Interfaith Association

National Association of Social Workers WV

Mercer County Resistance

Morgan County Indivisible

Morgantown NOW

Morgantown/Kingwood Branch of the NAACP

Mountaineers for Progress

Literacy Volunteers of Monongalia and Preston  
Counties

Prevent Child Abuse WV/TEAM for WV Children

Planned Parenthood South Atlantic

West Virginia FREE

Women's March West Virginia

Wood County Indivisible

WV Coalition Against Domestic Violence

WV Center on Budget and Policy

WV Citizen Action Group

WV Council of Churches

WV TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of  
Other Languages)