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IRSA Urges Enactment of SSI Extension for Disabled and Elderly Refugees Act

WASHINGTON DC, July 27, 2004— Immigration and Refugee Services of America applauds the introduction of the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Extension for Disabled and Elderly Refugees Act, recently introduced in the Senate with bi-partisan support by Senator Herbert Kohl of Wisconsin (S. 2623), and of companion legislation introduced in March in the House of Representatives by Representative Benjamin Cardin of Maryland (HR 4035). IRSA urges quick enactment of this important legislation.

Unlike most immigrants, refugees are fleeing political, religious, or ethnic persecution; accordingly, they are admitted to the United States under the Refugee Act of 1980 without regard to their ability to become self-sufficient. For elderly or disabled refugees who are unable to work, SSI benefits barely cover their living expenses. But they may no longer receive SSI benefits if they fail to become U.S. citizens within seven years of entering the United States. S. 2623 and HR 4035 would extend this arbitrary deadline from seven to nine years, enabling vulnerable refugees to continue receiving SSI in the interim.

“Protecting refugees is an essential American value, and these bills are worthy and overdue,” said IRSA Executive Director Lavinia Limón. “SSI is the only cash support for many disabled and elderly refugees who have no family members in the United States. Cutting off their SSI after seven years is arbitrary and unfair, since the Refugee Act’s framers understood that these refugees may need assistance. Many refugees can’t become citizens within seven years because of difficulties in learning English or bureaucratic processing delays at the Department of Homeland Security’s Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (CIS).”

The SSI extension bills would enable disabled and elderly refugees to live in dignity for two more years while pursuing their dream of U.S. citizenship and are an important step in the right direction. But IRSA urges Congress to repeal fully the SSI time limit in the future.

“These refugees aren’t getting younger or healthier,” said Limón. “The process of becoming a citizen is fraught with delays, difficulties, and expenses which a two-year extension can not fully alleviate. Many refugees who want to become citizens need help in getting through the naturalization process, and many who have debilitating conditions or are elderly may never pass the stringent requirements.”

Immigration and Refugee Services of America (IRSA) is a non-profit, nongovernmental organization that has served refugees and immigrants since 1911.

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