

# CONNECTICUT IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE COALITION

Est. 1998

*Promoting the rights and opportunities of immigrants and refugees in Connecticut,  
and fostering their civic participation.*



## Testimony by Robert J. Fishman to the Committee on Government Administration and Elections, on behalf of The Jewish Federation Association of Connecticut (JFACT) and the Connecticut Immigrant and Refugee Coalition (CIRC)

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Mutual Assistance Association.

### In support of Senate Bill 926

### An Act providing funds for a citizenship training program

Chairs of Committee, Senator Gayle Slossberg, Representative Christopher Caruso and members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, I am Robert J. Fishman, President of the Connecticut Immigrant and Refugee Coalition (CIRC) and Executive Director of the Jewish Federation Association of Connecticut (JFACT). I am here on behalf of the boards of directors of both organizations who have enthusiastically endorsed proposed Senate Bill 926, an act providing funds for a citizenship training program. We thank the committee for raising this important bill.

In the year 2000, the state of Connecticut provided funds in the amount of \$100,000 through the Department of Social Services for the purpose of customized citizenship training, primarily for elderly Refugees and Immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa and East Asia. JFACT was the recipient of the 2000 DSS grant and redistributed sufficient funds to the other refugee voluntary agencies (Connecticut Department of Social Services, Catholic Charities Migration & Refugee Services, Connecticut Coalition of Mutual Assistance Associations, Inc. ((South East Asian)), International Institute of Connecticut, Inc., Jewish Federation Association of Connecticut, and Lutheran Community Services of Southern New England) known as VOLAGS to run several programs throughout the state. We successfully demonstrated that we could get over 200 refugees and immigrants through citizenship with these programs, overcoming apprehension from difficult language, community and aged barriers. There are still many more vulnerable immigrants and refugees who are eligible for Citizenship. With our experience, JFACT and the rest of the VOLAGS can help them to attain Citizenship. In addition, the citizenship test has changed and the VOLAGS know how to offer appropriate instruction and teachers to follow the new regulations for citizenship. Furthermore, each VOLAG could also offer to help needy refugees with some assistance for the drastic increase to the cost of the citizenship and fingerprinting process.

Unfortunately the Department of Social Services was unable to fund the program after 2001. We are requesting a \$100,000 grant from the Secretary of State for this customized Citizenship training. Connecticut provides safety-net, social welfare benefits to approximately 200 refugees and Immigrants, who are eligible for Citizenship but unable or apprehensive to go through citizenship training, at an estimated cost of \$2.4 Million dollars per year to the state. Providing this requested \$100,000 grant to JFACT and the VOLAGS our past success with customized Citizenship training will save the State of CT approximately \$2.3 Million dollars per year. Once these individuals are citizens, the Federal Government is responsible for providing them with safety-net social welfare.

Current Federal Law states that a refugee must become a citizen after seven years of arriving in the United States. There are 20,000, mostly elderly, refugees across the country who have attempted and failed or are fearful of taking the test. To date, they are receiving notices that they will go off SSI, food stamps and Medicaid at the end of the seventh year.

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President Bush in his budget proposal has asked Congress to extend Federal benefits for one more year. As Congress is unlikely to extend this into the 9<sup>th</sup> year, at that point they will default to the responsibility of each state's budget for these benefits. We presume that an additional 100 of these individuals reside in Connecticut which will eventually cost the State and additional \$1.2 Million dollars.

In conclusion, a \$100,000 grant to JFACT and the VOLAGS from the Secretary of State will save the state in excess of \$3.5 Million per year. Our success record substantiates that we can effectively help these eligible refugees and immigrants overcome their trepidation and successfully become Citizens of the United States of America.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Robert J. Fishman  
CIRC President  
JFACT Executive Director

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