

Mindy Speech for Refugee Crisis Event

Welcome everyone! Thank you for joining us for this important event.

Tonight you're going to hear stories of courage, perseverance – and love. They're going to touch your heart, make you cheer – and make you cry. But that's okay because if it stirs you to action, we've done our job.

Like most of us here, my people – the Schers, the Silvermans, the Laxes and the Hymowitzes - were refugees too. They came to America in the early 1900's fleeing persecution and pogroms in Eastern Europe. They were helped by HIAS and the local Jewish Family Service organizations; and given a fresh start and new hope in the United States. I know that if it wasn't for their bravery and determination I wouldn't be standing before you tonight.

Let's understand: What is a refugee?

Some people use the words immigrant and refugee interchangeably – and that is incorrect. When we talk about the refugees who are resettled to the U.S., we're talking about people who need to leave their home countries because they are persecuted based on their religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity or political beliefs. They are often survivors of torture and sexual and gender-based violence. They face medical emergencies, don't want to live in refugee camps...often they're just families desperately trying to reunite. We're also talking about incredibly resilient individuals who want nothing more than the chance to successfully integrate, thrive and contribute to American society.

Did you know that in a “good year” the process of refugee resettlement can take anywhere from 2 to 10 years? It typically begins when Azita, our Resettlement Coordinator, receives a call from either HIAS or a local family saying they want to bring their mom or their son and his wife or their kids to Silicon Valley. It can take a few years until the “case” is assured. Then, for example, if the refugees are from Iran they spend one to six months in Vienna, or one to six years in Turkey while HIAS, the State Department, United Nations and up to 15 agencies vet them. These days Jews from the Former Soviet Union – who we still resettle – wait up to two years after they've submitted their documents for refugee status. Refugees must pass between 25 and 30 background checks before they can be admitted to the United States. Finally, once approved they fly to Los Angeles, Dallas, Chicago or New York for processing at the Office of International Organization of Migration and we then meet them at Mineta Airport in San Jose. Guess what refugees are allowed to bring: 2 suitcases per person if they're lucky. That's it.

For nearly 40 years, the United States has distinguished itself as a safe haven to refugees when they need it most, offering the promise of a new life in freedom without the fear of persecution. Now this safe haven is in danger.

In October 2017, the Federal Administration announced a historically low refugee admissions ceiling of 45,000 for fiscal year 2018. Prior to this administration, the number of refugees allowed into the US was 100,000 per year – and *that* number was considered low. Seven months into the federal fiscal year only 14,333 refugees have been resettled by the United States—compared to over 50,000 at the same point last year. If this pattern continues, the country will resettle less than 25,000 refugees this year.

Since July 2017, our Jewish Family Services has resettled **46** refugees. Last year at this time we had resettled **163** refugees. Since two months ago when we resettled an elderly Jewish couple from Russia, we haven't resettled anyone. Today we have 194 people in our pipeline waiting to come from Russia, Iran, Eritrea, and Iraq. These are all what the Trump administration calls "chain migration" but the real term is family reunification. Of these 194 people in our pipeline, 52 refugees were assured – which means they were already approved to come to the U.S. but because of the travel ban their assurances have expired. Now they have to go through the whole process again – and this will take years. We currently have people who left their home countries on the way to the U.S. and who are trapped in waystations around the world: we have 5 people stuck in Vienna, 6 in Turkey, 6 in Jordan, and 4 in Ethiopia. They've been in these places for 1 to 3 years already. Tonight you'll hear from Arezoo who will tell you about her dear sister who is stuck in Vienna. And if you go to the Advocacy Table at the end of the evening, you can find out about how you can attend a federal hearing that will take place this Friday in San Jose to help these refugees perhaps get another chance to come to the U.S.

Another category of status is that of being an asylee. Asylum status is a form of protection available to people who have been persecuted in their home countries like refugees but who are already in the United States or are seeking admission to the U.S. at a port of entry. One of them Tirhas, an asylee from Eritrea, who we honored last week at our Annual Meeting, is waiting for her husband and 4 children who are stuck in Ethiopia. We're currently also helping 11 asylees from Iran, Azerbaijan, Guatemala and Yemen.

There is something else I need to tell you. Like every other refugee resettlement agency in this country, Jewish Family Services of Silicon Valley gets paid per arrival. This means that when it comes to refugee resettlement, JFS is paid when that plane carrying our clients arrives on the tarmac in San Jose. The hundreds of hours we spend on pre-arrival is uncompensated. Because we've resettled about 100 refugees less than we typically plan on – while still fighting to increase those numbers nonetheless -- we're facing a \$100,000 deficit that we will need to make up. But know this: We will not abandon our refugee clients and their families while they are trying their best to make a new life here.

As most of you know, in December 2017 we joined with Jewish Family Service of Seattle as co-plaintiffs in a federal lawsuit challenging the 3rd Executive Order travel ban, imposed by President Trump. This Executive Order blocks refugee resettlement

from eleven countries, indefinitely stopping the program for refugees already living in the United States to be reunited with their spouses and children. But we do know this: we brought attention to the plight of the people we help who just want to bring their family members to Silicon Valley. And some of them – including two of our speakers here tonight - have since benefited from additional legal aid and publicity. For those of you who are curious, it didn't cost us a penny. We were represented pro bono by several fine immigration law firms.

When I asked Azita what it is like today for our clients who are trying to bring their family members to the U.S. she told me that the visas their relatives had obtained to come here are now cancelled. These people sold their homes and lost their jobs in their home countries. The families are desperate; they're crying, they're angry, they're confused. "Not knowing what's going on is very hard," Azita says. People are calling her from Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Jordan. Our anchor families who live in San Jose deposited \$2,600 per person – some deposited more than \$10,000 – for resettlement and are reluctant to request their money back because their families are in limbo and they don't want to jeopardize the chance that their families can come.

Our JFS pro bono legal immigration clinic assists refugee clients to apply for Green Cards and citizenship. Tonight you'll hear from one of our beautiful immigration attorneys who has her own story of courage.

We're all outraged about the cruel practice of family separation at the U.S. border. We signed onto our national Jewish Family Service umbrella organization and HIAS' statements and protests. As human service providers, we and our national networks find this new Department of Homeland Security policy to be in direct conflict with our Jewish values, our agency missions, and an affront to basic human compassion. We are proud to be in good Jewish company and add our agency name to this cause– and you can learn more about this too at the advocacy table.

Tomorrow, June 20th, is World Refugee Day. We join people across the United States to celebrate the courage and resiliency of refugees, recognizing the hardships they have faced, the new lives they have created, and the positive impact they have on our communities. We also recognize and remember that the United States has been a leader in protecting and resettling refugees. As UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres puts it, "This not about sharing a burden. It is about sharing a global responsibility, based not only the broad idea of our common humanity but also on the very specific obligations of international law. The root problems are war and hatred, not people who flee; refugees are among the first victims of terrorism."

All of this is difficult and depressing to hear. But there are also success stories we will share to touch your hearts. Even though we only resettled 46 people this past year, we provided assistance to 874 refugees and asylees through a variety of services this past year. And we promise to give you opportunities to make an impact, to pray with your feet.