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September 11, 2023

Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
1401 Constitution Avenue N.W.
Washington, D.C. 2030

Administrator Deanne Criswell
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 200024

Dear Secretary Mayorkas and Administrator Criswell,

I am writing to you today to express concerns regarding the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) Shelter and Services Program (SSP). Specifically, I am concerned that two program requirements will prevent destination cities, like Portland, Maine in my district, from applying for SSP funding.

Despite its relatively small population of 68,000, Portland is Maine's largest city and host to the State's highest concentration of social services. As such, Portland is a major destination for asylum seekers after they are released from Department of Homeland Security (DHS) custody; more than 1,600 asylum seekers have arrived in Portland so far this year, and more arrive every week.¹ These asylum seekers are forced to rely on nonprofits and local governments for support as they are unable to receive work authorization until six months after their asylum application is submitted.

In 2023, the City of Portland has already spent approximately \$500,000 housing asylum seekers at the now-closed Portland Expo Center shelter and anticipates spending an additional \$500,000 housing 192 asylum seekers in hotels going forward.² SSP is the only federal funding available to help communities shoulder these costs that are currently borne municipally. However, two program requirements prevent Portland from utilizing this funding.

First, the requirement that funds may only be used to provide services to noncitizen migrants within 45 days of their release from DHS custody is unworkable for destination cities. Portland, like many other northern cities, is the last stop for many asylum seekers once they are released from DHS custody. Without secondary placement options, asylum seekers face longer stays in shelters that cannot be supported by SSP because they exceed the 45-day limit. This "time-crunch" is exacerbated by the fact that most asylum seekers arrive in Portland within five to eight days of their release from custody, reducing the time that their stay in shelters can be supported

¹ <https://www.pressherald.com/2023/08/15/asylum-seekers-in-portland-expo-will-move-to-hotels-in-lewiston-freeport/>

² Ibid.

by SSP. Additionally, enforcing the 45-day limit would be nearly impossible to administer. Nonprofits would be forced either to send people to the streets after their stay has exceeded 45 total days or implement an unreasonably complex and expensive tracking system to monitor which individuals are funded by SSP and which are not.

Second, the requirement to collect and maintain a database of alien registration numbers (A-numbers) for clients served is operationally unwieldy and antithetical to the mission of many potential subgrantees. Given the large number of asylum seekers residing in Portland, tracking A-Numbers would be logistically impossible. Additionally, potential subgrantees do not collect A-Numbers as a matter of policy and have serious privacy concerns about how that information could be potentially used by FEMA.

Given the extreme financial burden outlined above, I had hoped SSP would largely meet this need, and could be accessed by Maine organizations. Unfortunately, United Way of Southern Maine could not apply for the \$497,229 unsolicited award opportunity available in the first tranche of FY23 funding due to the program's burdensome requirements. This will prevent Maine organizations from participating in the program. I urge you to revisit the requirements of SSP to ensure the program benefits communities and organizations that support asylum seekers throughout the country, not just those along the southern border.

Thank you for your consideration of these requests, please reach out to Christina Rankin in my office at Christina.Rankin@mail.house.gov or at (202) 225-6116 with any questions or additional information.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress