

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 6, 2015

The Honorable Jeh Johnson  
Secretary of Homeland Security  
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Johnson,

Over recent weeks, we have all seen the horrifying human toll of the massive flight of refugees from the Middle East. Facing the world's worst crisis of forcibly displaced people since World War II, the international community is now grappling with how to make the global refugee resettlement system accommodate these record numbers at a scale and a pace that provides true emergency relief. We write you to request updates on refugee interview processing, especially as it functions in conflict regions.

The Administration has proposed allowing 10,000 Syrian refugees resettle in the United States. However, refugees face a multi-year, multi-step screening process before they can be legally resettled. It is, of course, a national security imperative that anyone granted admission to the United States is vetted comprehensively. For this reason, we believe the Department of Homeland Security has an important role to play in alleviating the enormous pressure faced by many of our allies in the Middle East and Europe.

Before refugees can enter the background check process, they must interview with Refugee Affairs officials from the Department of Homeland Security's division of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). These officials, termed "circuit riders," travel worldwide throughout the year to interview refugee applicants. However, circuit riders travel too infrequently to keep up with the mounting backlog of refugee applicants in the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program pipeline. Moreover, they are often cancelled in countries where populations of greatest need reside. This means that the refugees in the most dangerous areas are often stalled in refugee processing.

For example, DHS has suspended circuit rides in Lebanon, a country with a population of 4 million that hosts about 1 million Syrian refugees. And in Iraq, there is a backlog of approximately 57,000 cases after circuit rides were suspended for nearly one year. They have since resumed, but at a fraction of the scale.

In October 2014, we understand that DHS seriously considered permitting DHS refugee interviews to be conducted via videoconferencing. This technology is widely used within the U.S. Government for interviewing purposes and may be less expensive than sending U.S. employees in person overseas to conduct interviews.

To help us better understand the benefits, impediments, potential implementation, and near- and long-term costs of videoconferencing interviews for Syrian refugees, we respectfully request that you provide the following information:

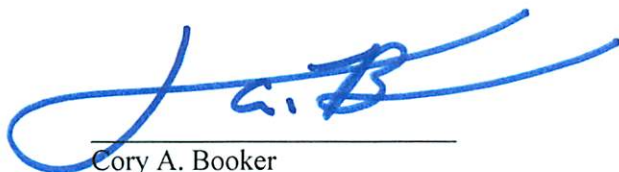
1. Please provide an update on the schedule and timing of circuit rides to Lebanon and Iraq for the next 12 months and the number of expected interviews in each.
2. What is the status, if any, of DHS's plans to conduct future refugee interviews via videoconferencing?
3. We understand that DHS considered using videoconferencing in other countries but ultimately decided not to pursue this approach. Why not?

4. Please provide an explanation of any material difference between what can be gathered by an in-person interview as compared to what can be gathered by an interview using video-conference technology.
5. When conducting interviews via videoconferencing, how would DHS ensure that the feed between DHS and the refugee remains secure?
6. Please provide a cost benefit analysis comparing a secure video conference interview and an in person interview conducted by officials from USCIS.

Refugee interviews conducted via videoconferencing, where needed, would appear to provide a commonsense approach to enable DHS to conduct interviews even in those countries where security concerns most inhibit circuit rides and endanger refugees. However, we would not encourage cutting any corners that could decrease the national security interests of the United States.

We thank you for your attention to this important issue and look forward to working with you to respond to this humanitarian disaster.

Sincerely,



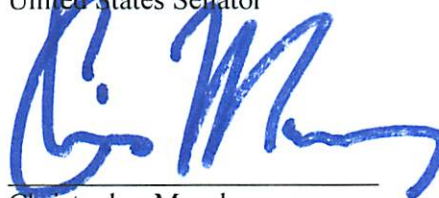
Cory A. Booker  
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator



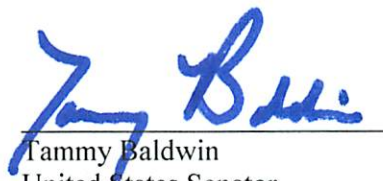
Gary Peters  
United States Senator



Christopher Murphy  
United States Senator



Christopher Coons  
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin  
United States Senator



Barbara Mikulski  
United States Senator