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**Title:** Executive Director

**Organization or Agency:** IRIS

**Topic:** SB00401 - AAC A BRIDGE PROGRAM TO ALLOW ACCESS TO FOOD HOUSING AND HEALTH CARE BENEFITS.

Supports

**Testimony:**

Senator Osten and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today on this critical issue.

As the executive director of Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services, which has welcomed immigrants to the state since 1982, I urge this legislative assembly to approve this vital bridge program. As you know, approximately 360,000 Connecticut residents, including children, seniors, and people with disabilities, are facing a loss of or significant reduction in SNAP benefits, Medicaid, and housing. Cities where we and sister agencies have resettled refugees and other immigrants -- New London, Hartford, New Haven, Waterbury, and Bridgeport — are expected to be hit hardest, with households facing reduced or suspended benefits.

Connecticut can and must create a bridge to support all those impacted including immigrants. These are neighbors, colleagues, friends, and valued community members. They are refugees, asylees, humanitarian parolees, and victims of torture or domestic violence. I would emphasize that some of the changes to eligibility, in particular the need to have a green card (legal permanent residence) are recent devastating changes; the human circumstances of those who will lose access have not changed. The cruelty of the federal changes is compounded by the fact that most of the people we serve face suspended green card processing due to various federal travel bans and restrictions. This committee and our state's leadership cannot undo the harm that has already been done, or that which is imminent; you can demonstrate through your actions that Connecticut continues to welcome immigrants.

In fact, the state must take action in the interests of all of the state's residents. According to recent reporting from CT Public, the U.S. is already experiencing zero immigration and declining population growth. Immigrants have been a key driver of population and economic growth in Connecticut, which is the 7th oldest state in the nation in terms of median age. A 2023 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report found the net positive impact of immigrants' contributions to our economy over 15 years to be staggering - totaling tens of billions more than the modest investment made to support them upon arrival.

In this context, the competition for immigrant talent will only intensify across the country. Connecticut must do all that it can to retain the immigrants already contributing to our communities. Creating this bridge program is a vital first step.

I urge you to take action and provide the necessary support to ensure all vulnerable residents in our state, including immigrants, do not lose access to critical food, housing and medical services. It is not only the humane thing to do, but an investment in Connecticut's future prosperity. Thank you.