

LOU BARLETTA

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November 18, 2015

Governor Thomas W. Wolf
Room 225
Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17120

Dear Governor Wolf:

I write to follow up on my separate letters regarding the release of federal education funding already provided to Pennsylvania (October 23, 2015) and concerning my disapproval of your plan to welcome Syrian refugees to the Commonwealth (November 16, 2015), to which I received no replies. As you know, you have agreed to cooperate with the relocation of refugees to Pennsylvania while the protracted budget impasse between your administration and the General Assembly drags on. I find it unconscionable that you would permit state agencies and resources to facilitate the flow of funding to organizations assisting the refugees, while you simultaneously have blocked your treasury from releasing to public schools federal dollars, which have already been appropriated by Congress and dispersed to Pennsylvania.

My objections to the acceptance of refugees remain, because in my consultation with national security experts – including two from the FBI and the Secretary of Homeland Security himself – I have been advised that we have no real ability to gather information and properly screen anyone fleeing Syria. While you and I may disagree on that point of public safety, I had hoped we would see eye-to-eye on the importance of educating our own children, especially as our school districts now sorely need the federal monies to keep their doors open without continuing to borrow money for operations.

While some have claimed that states have no ability to affect the federal government's decision to move refugees to various regions of the country, that is not entirely the case. Federal law states that the Director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement "shall consult" with state and local governments, as well as the independent non-profit agencies that sponsor and maintain the relocation programs. The consultations are required to occur regularly, which is deemed to be no less than quarterly. In addition, federal law also requires that the federal agencies should, "to the maximum extent possible, take into account recommendations of the State." It is clear, then, that Pennsylvania has the same ability to influence decision-making as any other state may have.

Further, Pennsylvania and its localities do indeed have control over the locations selected for housing any refugees eligible under the federal program. Non-profit organizations, such as the U.S. Committee on Refugees and Immigrants, must arrange for shelter, support services, and staff within a state before contracting with the federal government to receive the evacuees. These organizations must have the cooperation of government at all levels, including local and state, to be able to perform their duties. It is clear from your position on the refugee situation that you have directed your administration and the state resources at your disposal to be cooperative in the effort.

At the same time, public school districts have approached your office seeking access to federal education funds which have already been distributed to Pennsylvania. These are funds which would keep educating our children and prevent school districts from having to borrow money simply to remain open while your disagreement with the state legislature continues. All that needs to happen is for you to permit your Treasury Department to release the duly appropriated federal funds, which, unfortunately, you have pointedly refused to do. The result has been a statewide panic among students, parents, teachers, and administrators who do not know how long their schools will continue to operate.

The entire situation also begs examination of how much strain local and state social services can tolerate, as added refugees in our communities will necessarily mean an increased drain on already-scarce resources. As is the case with public schools, our social safety net will begin to sag under the weight of too many demands.

If I cannot convince you to rethink your acquiescence to the Syrian refugee relocation program, perhaps I can appeal to your concern for students in our public schools. Please do not, by your actions, favor the former over the latter.

Sincerely,



Lou Barletta
Member of Congress