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June 8, 2009

Honorable Michael M. Honda
United States House of Representatives
1713 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Honda,

On behalf of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), the national agency established by Lutheran churches in the United States to carry out the churches' ministry with uprooted people, I applaud you for re-introducing the Reuniting Families Act, H.R. 2709. LIRS recognizes the importance of the family unity in building strong communities and is deeply concerned that the U.S. immigration system keeps families apart for years and sometimes decades. We see the strain of this separation on American families and communities, particularly during tough economic times. This important piece of legislation advances the common good by enabling family members to reunite with their loved ones more quickly and by reducing hardship faced by families at risk of being separated.

Christian Scripture and tradition uphold the central role of the family in the formation of faith, character and community. Almost 500 years ago, Martin Luther, the father of the Reformation and the Lutheran church, spoke passionately about the critical role and responsibility that the family plays in the formation of faith. From the beginning, Lutherans worldwide have been committed to protecting and promoting family unity.

Following World War II one out of every six Lutherans in the world was displaced. With the participation of 6,000 congregations, Lutherans in the United States opened their homes, churches and communities to assist tens of thousands of migrants and their families. Lutherans have continued this ministry and every day bear witness to how our society is strengthened and renewed by the contributions of migrant families.

Our current family-based immigration system requires some U.S. citizens to wait more than two decades to be with their close family members. Spouses and minor children of green card holders must wait as long as seven years to join their families in the United States. As an organization that provides services to families nationwide, we see no benefit to anyone when families are separated for this long.

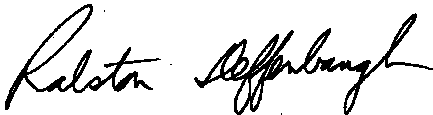
A specific example of the painful separation caused by the current immigration system is that of a Lutheran woman of Guyanese origin living in New Jersey. Her brother is developmentally disabled and was being cared for in Guyana by their mother. Their mother died and no one else in Guyana could care for the brother. The sister applied for her brother to join her in the United States but would have had to wait 11 years for a visa. Instead of waiting, the brother came on a visitor visa but did not return after the visa expired. Fortunately, he was able to obtain legal status many years later, but under current law he would not have been able to remain in the United States with his sister.

The Reuniting Families Act would help to reduce the time that some family members must wait before being able to join their loved ones. The bill would also give the government authority to ameliorate hardship faced by families who might otherwise be forced apart by the current restrictions in immigration laws.

Family unity has long been a fundamental principle of U.S. immigration policy, and it must remain a critical component of our country's immigration system in the future. The immigration system should be reformed to reunite families as quickly as possible.

The United States prides itself on being a nation that supports family values, yet the current immigration system forces families to wait much too long to be together. The Reuniting Families Act would alleviate pressure on U.S. borders, allow more immigrants to utilize legal immigration channels and continue to foster the development of vibrant American communities. We applaud your leadership on this important issue and hope other members of the House of Representatives join as co-sponsors.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ralston Deffenbaugh". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "R" and a long, sweeping underline.

Ralston H. Deffenbaugh, Jr.
President, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service