

General Debate on H.R. 1452

June 13, 1985

WILLIAM LEHMAN

Mr. Chairman, I rise in support of H.R. 1452, the Refugee Assistance Extension Act of 1985, and I want to express my support in particular for the authorization of targeted assistance.

Shortly after the Refugee Act was first enacted in 1980, South Florida faced the massive uncontrolled Mariel boatlift. This wave of immigration was unlike any we had experienced before, and I pray we will never have to deal with anything like it again. There was no prescreening or orderly resettlement program. Within a short period of time, 120,000 Cubans reached our shores. South Florida tried valiantly to cope with this sudden shock, but local agencies were quickly overwhelmed.

This sudden influx was not the fault of local authorities. It was the result of a breakdown of federal immigration policy and the failure of our foreign policy to meet the challenge of dealing effectively with Cuba. What federal assistance we in Florida have received has fallen far short of the costs borne by the state and local governments. More than \$150 million has never been reimbursed.

The Cuban-Haitian entrants who arrived on our shores have by and large chosen to stay in Florida. They do so for a variety of reasons, but let me assure my colleagues that the level of welfare payments is not one of them. Florida ranks 39th among states in terms of monthly AFDC payments and there

is no state general assistance program for the single males who make up a large portion of the Mariel Cubans.

Five years after the Mariel boatlift, the need for help and the federal responsibility remain. Many of those who arrived in 1980 are not the kind of people who assimilate easily into a community. Criminals and persons with mental health problems--persons who would not have gotten into this country under normal circumstances--do not easily get jobs and become self-supporting. In recent testimony before the Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor-Health and Human Services-Education, a state official pointed out that in 1983, over 200 Cuban entrants were booked into the Dade County jail every month. In 1985, over 400 entrants have been booked into the county jail each month. Unemployment among Cuban-Haitian entrants remains high, perhaps as high as 30 to 40 percent according to testimony presented by the state. Clearly, the assimilation process is not working.

Because this program has lacked an authorization, targeted assistance funding has been provided through continuing resolutions. This process has resulted in very late allocations to states and has made it very difficult for administrators to plan their programs. Florida currently has only enough money to fully fund its programs until the end of this year. This authorization is crucial to ensuring timely and adequate funding of these much-needed programs.

I also want to thank the Committee for including in its bill an authorization for reimbursing states and counties for the costs of incarcerating Mariel Cubans. This is particularly important in light of the

recent suspension of our agreement with Fidel Castro that would have provided for the gradual return of criminals to Cuba.

I urge support for the Committee's bill and I hope my colleagues will vote against any attempts to eliminate the targeted assistance program.