

## **OUR IMMIGRATION SYSTEM MUST BE REFORMED AN OVERVIEW**

### ***The Problem***

Since its founding, America has been a land of opportunity for immigrants from across the globe. Our country grew and prospered because we welcomed large numbers of ambitious and skilled immigrants who helped grow local economies, shared cultural traditions, and helped define the American tradition.

That tradition and the laws that underscore it are in jeopardy of falling victim to the same political stalemate that is keeping our country from solving many of its problems. The number of immigrants allowed into the country is set by Congress. Yet, the last time Congress acted to adjust the system was in 1990. In the ensuing years, the number of immigrants living here without permission has reached 11 million. They came drawn by our country's great demand for workers in the 1990s and they continued coming here in the early 2000s for the same reason.

Today's immigration system is ineffective because it is not permitted to adjust to market or workforce demands, and it forces too many families to endure long separation. The system must be repaired. Immigration and today's immigrants are still vital to our economic well-being. Deport every undocumented worker in this country, as some want to do, would be disastrous. Failing to provide legal opportunities for immigrants and family members to come in the future will make matters worse. Consider the following:

- The Texas State Comptroller has estimated that if all of the state's undocumented immigrants were to leave Texas, the state's Gross State Product would be depressed by \$17.7 billion.
- Nationally, one estimate of economic loss from an exclusive focus on deportation would be \$2.6 trillion over a 10-year period.
- Workers and employers are stymied by a lack of visas, and American families with loved ones abroad face a growing wait for the same number of annual family-related visas that were set a generation ago.
- The rights of American workers are undermined when there are so many unauthorized workers in the workforce fearful of deportation; unscrupulous employers are able to use this fear to undercut the rights and wages of all workers.

- Policies that drive the undocumented further underground make it harder for law enforcement officials to serve their public safety and national security roles.

The crisis builds. Yet, Congress seems too divided to solve the problem. This lack of Congressional action has left Americans frustrated and angry. States, and even some towns, have reacted to the frustration by passing their own laws creating a patchwork of policies that generate more anger and frustration without resolving a problem that can only be solved at the national level. People trying to come here to work or join family find themselves caught in a hodge-podge of needlessly complicated and outdated rules and regulations. Meanwhile, our enforcement personnel, who should be focused on security threats and criminals, are instead chasing farmworkers, busboys, and nannies.

### ***The Practical Solutions***

The challenge of making our immigration system work for immigrants and for America can be solved. Some of the most experienced minds on the issue of immigration have already created proposals that have won wide bipartisan support in Congress, and that have the support of the American people.

Common-sense solutions to our immigration problems include:

- **Quicker Family Reunification:** The family is at the core of our immigration system. Yet our antiquated system keeps families separated sometimes for decades. Family members who have been waiting in line should have their admission expedited, and those admitted on work visas should be able to keep their nuclear families intact. Reform should also ensure that in the future, more legal opportunities are provided for the immigration of close family members, so the kind of family separation we see today does not return.
- **Attracting the Best and the Brightest:** The immigration system now puts up too many barriers for the world's top talent to work for us, and not our competitors. The rules must be adjusted to make it easier for **foreign students** who train in U.S. colleges and universities to stay, work and contribute to our economic growth.
- **A Work Visa System that Responds to Our Economy and Our Workforce:** Because our visa quotas for immigrant workers and professionals are years out of date, many are forced to wait months or years to immigrate. More visas should be made available temporarily to clear the backlog. Going forward, the number of workers and professionals allowed to enter the country each year should be adjusted up and down depending on the needs of our economy. Separate quotas on the number of workers or professionals allowed from any one country should be eliminated. At the same time, employers must be monitored to ensure that immigrants,

especially those here on temporary work visas, are not being mistreated by employers who cheat the system.

- **A Realistic Approach to the Undocumented:** Immigrants who are here illegally broke the law, but their importance to our economy demands a realistic solution that requires them to register with the government, go through the same national security and criminal background checks that all immigrants must go through, pay a penalty and back taxes, learn English and, if no problems are discovered, be put in line for legal residency and eventual citizenship. Giving them legal status will translate to an estimated \$1.5 trillion in extra economic activity for the U.S. over the next ten years.
- **An Enforcement Strategy that Prioritizes Threats to National Security and Public Safety:** No enforcement strategy will work unless the law is realistic, fiscally reasonable and enforceable. A new national immigration strategy must include an intelligent enforcement regime focused on strategies that detect and deter terrorists, crack down on criminal smugglers and prosecute employers who skirt the law. At the same time, enforcement must include efficient inspections and screening practices and fair proceedings. Such a system will better enable the nation to know who is already here and who is coming in the future.
- **Promotion of Citizenship and Civic Participation and Help to Local Communities:** Immigration to America works because newcomers are encouraged to become new Americans. Providing adult immigrants with quality English instruction, promoting and preparing them for citizenship, and providing them with opportunities to move up the economic ladder will quicken the pace of true integration into the fabric of America. The system should also support local communities working to welcome newcomers, as it is cities and towns across our country where the transformation of immigrants from newcomers to new Americans actually takes place.

The National Immigration Forum is committed to achieving comprehensive reform that works for immigrants and for America. We believe that there are practical solutions to these complex problems that address legitimate economic and national security concerns and at the same time honor the tradition of our nation as a land of opportunity for all.