

**Jackson Lee, S. (2001, September 3). Q: Should Congress grant amnesty to illegal immigrants? Yes: Make it easier for longtime, tax-paying, law-abiding residents to get legal status. *Insight on the News*, vol. 37, pp. 40 – 43.**

It needs to be said at the outset that the United States does *not* need an immigration amnesty such as the one Congress authorized in 1986. Instead of a blanket amnesty, what America needs is to allow hardworking, taxpaying individuals who have been residing in the United States for many years the opportunity to earn permanent residency status—the green card—which ultimately would lead to citizenship.

Furthermore, this opportunity should be afforded to immigrants from all nations. Many of the undocumented are from Mexico, Canada, Central and South America, the Caribbean, Asia, Africa and Europe. A fair, uniform, earned-adjustment program that benefits all immigrants regardless of their country of origin is essential.

It is part of the American tradition to show compassion to immigrants. And many undocumented immigrants living in the United States have *earned* access to legalization by their hard work and demonstrably high moral character. Earned access to legalization would adjust the status of many hardworking, taxpaying immigrants, as well as students educated here who have resided in the United States for many years.

### **Undocumented Workers Deserve Respect**

Immigrants always have made significant contributions to our country. Many, if not most, of the undocumented individuals in our country are productive and have made invaluable contributions to the U.S. economy. It would be inhumane and imprudent to tell longtime undocumented residents that they cannot become U.S. citizens. Furthermore, to perpetuate a large undocumented population is to establish a permanent second class which is subject to manipulation and criminal exploitation.

The government estimates that 6 million to 9 million undocumented people are living and working in the United States. They are a positive and essential force for growth, productivity and diversity.

Denying these people access to legalization has serious ramifications. A great number of them are children, and although they attend grammar and high school, such children have little or no chance to attend universities across our nation. Without legal status these students cannot get in-state tuition. A policy that denies education to immigrant children relegates them as a class to a life of working in low-paying, low-skilled jobs. This is as unjust as it is foolish. Allowing access to a higher education will result in great contributions to our society.

In addition, a great number of the undocumented individuals have children who are U.S. citizens. These children will grow up receiving benefits without any problems. However, these children will see how their parents are treated— as second-class. This is a situation we cannot allow.

### **The Immigration Statement of Principles**

On Aug. 2, 2001, I, as cochairwoman of the House Democratic Caucus Immigration Task Force, and Democratic Reps. Silvestre Reyes of Texas and Luis Gutierrez of Illinois, along with House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt of Missouri and other members of Congress, unveiled a concise, comprehensive and, most importantly, an inclusive "Immigration Statement of Principles."

This statement is the fruition of the mission of the Immigration Task Force—to devise a succinct, inclusive and equitable proposal that reflects the Democratic Party's philosophy of achieving the core values of all Americans, especially family reunification, fundamental fairness and economic opportunity. In addition, the Immigration Statement of Principles stands by the people

who fuel the economic engine that drives the U.S. economy.

The United States' current immigration policy has fundamental problems that must be rectified, and immigrants need and deserve redemption for what our nation's policies have forced them to go through in terms of tearing families apart and not allowing enough avenues for hardworking, taxpaying immigrants to gain earned access to legalization.

The main objectives of the Immigration Statement of Principles are family reunification, earned access to legalization, border safety and protection, an enhanced temporary-worker program and an end to unfair discrimination against legal immigrants. The Democratic mission is quite clear: We want job enhancement for immigrants and meaningful access to educational opportunities.

### **Family Reunification**

Family reunification is essential. Our current immigration policy works to tear families apart. The current statutory ceilings for family and employment-based immigrant visas no longer are adequate and have resulted in unacceptable immigration backlogs. There are more than 1 million spouses and children of permanent residents waiting for immigrant visas that will reunite them with their families here in the United States. It is wrong for U.S. citizens and permanent residents to be forced to choose between the American Dream and a united family. We cannot deny immigrants who work hard and pay taxes the opportunity to be reunified with their families. After all, undocumented residents must pay U.S. sales, fuel and excise taxes on their purchases just like everyone else. Most undocumented workers pay payroll taxes as a condition of employment.

Adjusting the status of these longtime residents will give employers a more stable workforce and improve the wages and working conditions of all workers. Permanent residency should be available to those who are enrolled in courses in the English language or U.S. civics, demonstrate ties to their community and are admissible under our immigration laws.

### **A Larger Immigration Agenda**

The Immigration Statement of Principles includes provisions to support the mission of the U.S. Border Patrol. We need to increase safety and security at our borders and provide Border Patrol agents with the necessary resources while ensuring safety and due-process protections to immigrants at our borders.

An enhanced temporary-worker program should be available to persons who desire to work in the United States temporarily, as well as those who choose to stay permanently. However, this program will be structured differently from past "guest-worker" programs to avoid the troubling legacy of exploitation and abuse.

While a temporary-worker program can be an effective way for immigrants to move between their home countries and the United States—and a way for recent arrivals in the United States to earn permanent status—we must recognize that a temporary-worker program can not stand alone. It must be part of a larger immigration agenda.

The Immigration Statement of Principles declares that we must end unfair discrimination against legal immigrants. This last point addresses a piece of unfinished business of the last Congress. We must restore due-process protections to permanent and other long-term residents affected by the 1996 immigration laws and restore vital public benefits.

This renewed commitment to immigration by the House Democratic Caucus advances a new immigration ethic because it is consistent and evenhanded—something immigration policy has lacked in the past. It is all-inclusive because it addresses all immigrants who are hardworking, who pay taxes and have good moral character. There simply is no reason why a restaurant worker, landscaper or meatpacker should not be able to work in the United States if a high-technology worker is able to do the same.

Immigrants contribute to our society. They share the same values that most Americans share—working hard, paying taxes and raising families. If we do not help the immigrants in our country, we will be shutting out people who want to share the values of freedom and democracy. Immigration

contributes to our country's prosperity. This new immigration policy represents the hope that immigrants will reach their dream of living and working and providing a better future for their families.

This is a nation of laws, but it also is a nation of fairness, equity, humanity, and democracy. And we cannot forget that we are a nation of immigrants. Our huddled masses are yearning to breathe free—to have access and the golden door open to legalization. This is the least we can do for those who have demonstrated their commitment to our country.