



Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security, and Claims
Oversight Hearing on "How Illegal Immigration Impacts Constituencies:
Perspectives from Members of Congress (Part I)."

Prepared Statement of the Honorable Luis V. Gutierrez
Member of Congress

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2237 Rayburn House Office Building

Good afternoon, Chairman Hostettler and Ranking Member Jackson Lee, and members of the committee.

It is with great pleasure that I appear before this subcommittee today to share my views on how our immigrant community impacts the City of Chicago, where my Congressional District resides.

I hope to use my time to try to debunk some of the myths and misinformation about the issue of immigration and to explain why we desperately need to reform our broken immigration system.

I thought I'd start today by quoting something I recently read.

And I quote...."[F]oreign immigration, which in the past has added so much to the wealth, development of resources and increase of power to the nation, the asylum of the oppressed of all nations, should be fostered and encouraged by a liberal and just policy."

I could not agree more.

But where did I read that? Was it in the policy papers produced by some progressive think tank? No. Was it in the editorial pages of a liberal-leaning newspaper? No.

Actually, those eloquent and forward-looking words were from the Republican Party Platform in 1864 and I think we would be wise to pay close attention to those sentiments.

But if you want a more modern, timely quote on the subject, Grover Norquist said

yesterday, "immigrant bashing is not a vote winner."

Look, I am the first to agree that our immigration system in this nation is badly broken and fixing it must be a top priority of Congress.

But how do we get there?

Is the answer that we deport the 8 to 11 million undocumented individuals in this nation who are working and contributing to their communities? What would a mass deportation even look like? How much would it cost?

According to a recent study by the Center for American Progress, it would cost more than 41 billion dollars a year -- and would exceed the entire budget of the Department of Homeland Security for Fiscal Year 2006. And if you don't trust those numbers, Secretary Chertoff recently told the Senate Judiciary Committee that it would cost "billions and billions and billions," adding that it would not be a feasible idea.

And what if we were to spend these billions and billions of dollars, what would happen to our workforce and to our economy?

In the factories of Chicago, immigrants today make up more than one out of every four workers, and without their labor these factories might need to move elsewhere to find available workers.

And similar trends cut across various industries. Mexican immigrants today fill almost half of the blue-collar, service-related and unskilled jobs in our city. It is not an exaggeration to say that our city would grind to a halt without these workers.

In fact, the Labor Department estimates that the total number of jobs requiring only short-term training will increase from 53.2 million in 2000 to 60.9 million by 2010, a net increase of 7.7 million jobs.

And the fact is Americans are simply unwilling to do these jobs. I don't blame them. It is truly arduous labor. But these jobs need to get done to keep our economy growing and our communities thriving.

I think President Reagan probably summed this issue up best back in 1977, when he saw apples rotting on a tree because there were no local workers to pick them.

He said, "It makes one wonder about the illegal alien fuss. Are great numbers of our unemployed really victims of the illegal alien invasion or are those illegal tourists actually doing work our own people won't do? One thing is certain in this hungry world; no regulation or law should be allowed if it results in crops rotting

in the fields for lack of harvesters."

It is probably important to note that today more than 80 percent of all apple pickers in Washington State are immigrant farm workers and over half of them are undocumented.

So what should we do to ensure that we create an immigration system that, as President Bush said, can "match willing foreign workers with willing employers when no Americans can be found to fill the job?"

I think the answer is comprehensive immigration reform.

I know there is a lot of talk about enforcement and border security provisions. And -- don't get me wrong -- it is extremely important, but it is only one part of the immigration equation.

A recent study by Princeton Professor Douglas Massey on the U.S. Border Patrol Budget shows that its budget has increased tenfold since 1986. And, as you know, this rapidly rising budget has done very little to stem the rapid rise in undocumented immigration.

So I think we need to do more than simply throw more money at the problem. We need to abandon the same old, tired, narrow and failed policies of the past. And we need to think more comprehensively and more strategically about the issue -- because building a giant fence or sending more unfunded mandates to our states will not solve this problem. And the hard reality is that these policies would only drive millions of undocumented workers further into our nation's shadows. And all the challenges that my colleagues talk about -- from health care costs to other factors -- will remain if we have millions of people operating in the shadows.

I believe the solution lies in the fact that we must stop targeting Windex-wielding cleaning ladies and start focusing our limited resources on better targeting the real terrorists and criminals and smugglers who wish to do our nation harm.

And I think that goal is achievable if we combine smart enforcement with a sensible and pragmatic path for new workers to come to this country -- in a legal, safe and humane way -- to fill shortfalls in our workforce.

However, none of this will be successful unless we deal directly with the 8 to 11 million undocumented workers who are already here -- living and working and contributing to a better, more dynamic America.

And let me be clear here: I believe that these people should be penalized. But the punishment should fit the crime. They should be fined and fingerprinted and thoroughly vetted. But they should not have their families destroyed for decades

because they came here to support them. They should be allowed to be full and productive members of our society. So they can pay all their taxes and not have to rely on costly emergency medical care.

But just attacking them will not solve the problem -- we need real solutions.

When I recently asked Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan about immigration, he stated:

"As I've said before, I'm always supportive of expanding our immigration policies. I think that immigration has been very important to the success of this country. And I fully support it."

And personally I think expanding our policies should be along the lines of President Reagan's views of immigrants to our country as people who "posses a determination that with hard work and freedom, they would live a better life and their children even more so."

Or President Bush who stated: "they're willing to walk across miles of desert to do work that some Americans won't do. And we've got to respect that, it seems like to me, and treat those people with respect."

So I think that it is important that we as a Congress and, in particular the work of this committee, focus on creating an immigration system that takes into account the important contributions immigration make -- and will continue to make -- if we encourage them to come out of the shadows.

I know many blame immigrants for all of our nation's ills, but the statistics I see and the people I meet in Chicago and across the nation reflect an entirely different perspective. And it seems to me that these individuals who scapegoat our immigrant community ignore the very obvious, documented and specific benefits of immigration to the U.S. economy and society.

In terms of health care, a recent Harvard/Columbia University study showed that health care expenditures are substantially lower for immigrants than for U.S.-born persons.

Similar to how undocumented workers help sustain our Social Security System with a subsidy of as much as \$7 billion a year, these individuals are also helping to subsidize our nation's health care system through the taxes they pay.

Immigrants also pay billion of dollars a year in taxes. One study showed that the undocumented in New York pay more than one billion dollars a year in taxes. Whether that is sales tax, payroll tax, cigarette tax, they are making enormous contributions.

And they are helping ensure the flow of the most important type of capital -- human capital -- back into our cities.

According to Crain's Chicago Business, "Immigrants are moving into and bringing new life to many blue-collar areas of Chicago that had previously been losing population. These new residents contributed to the city's net gain in population during the 1990s."

And I think that we, as a Congress, would be wise to take these factors into account.

And that is why I believe it is so urgent for Congress to tackle the issue of comprehensive immigration reform. And why I think it is important to hard look at legislative proposals like Rep. Jackson Lee's and the one I introduced with Representatives Kolbe and Flake and Senators McCain and Kennedy.

Because each day that goes by with silence and inaction means the potential for another dead body turning up in the desert, another child separated from her parent, another worker exploited and another dream denied.

Thank you again, Chairman Hostettler and Ranking Member Jackson Lee, for giving me this great opportunity to be here today. I welcome any questions you and the other members may have.