

**STATEMENT OF COUNCILMAN DENNIS ZINE, CITY OF LOS ANGELES
ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES
HOUSE JUDICIARY SUBCOMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION, CITIZENSHIP,
REFUEES, BORDER SECURITY AND INTERNATIONAL LAW
MAY 17, 2007**

Good afternoon. Thank you Madam Chair and members of the Subcommittee.

My name is Dennis Zine. I am a Member of the City Council of Los Angeles and am here today representing the National League of Cities, the nation's oldest and largest organization devoted to strengthening and promoting cities. I am a member of NLC's Board of Directors and chair of NLC's Immigration Task Force.

NLC is pleased to have this opportunity to speak to you this afternoon to present our views on the impact of immigration on America's cities and towns and the need for comprehensive federal immigration reform legislation. The absence of a functioning federal system regulating an orderly flow of immigration has resulted in financial, cultural and political strains in communities across the nation. As this debate drags on local governments are caught in the middle – the federal government controls the flow and regulation of immigration but the responsibility for integrating immigrants into the community and providing services rests primarily with us.

Local elected officials work very hard to build vibrant and stable communities that are centers of commerce, promote economic development and sustain families. Major changes such as large influxes of new residents – illegal or legal – create instability.

Recent headlines highlighting new restrictive laws on housing for illegal immigrants in Farmer's Branch, TX, Hazelton, PA and in Fairfax, VA, right here in the backyard of the Capitol are examples of the stress local governments are facing in dealing with fast-growing immigrant populations, and how to best balance the needs of newcomers with more established residents.

As immigrants – both legal and illegal -- flood our communities, more than 90 cities or counties have proposed, passed or rejected laws prohibiting landlords from leasing to illegal immigrants, penalizing businesses that employ undocumented workers or training police to enforce federal immigration laws.

While immigrants have strengthened our country and our communities in innumerable ways, many communities are straining to find the right approach in such an unsettled environment over immigration and federal immigration policy.

In addition to cultural impacts on the community, the responsibility for providing social services, education and health care is falling to state and local governments, which are feeling the financial impact of both legal and illegal immigrants in cities and towns.

NLC will soon release the findings of the 2007 State of America's Cities survey which will help quantify the impact of immigration on our communities. Based on my discussions with colleagues, cities across the country report that increases in immigrant populations pose new service challenges at the same time that they bring benefits to the community. While immigrants are important contributors to local economies, cities also absorb the cost of providing services and are challenged by the social integration of those immigrants into the fabric of the community.

Based on US Census Bureau data, in 2003, 11 percent of the foreign born population lived in the Midwest, 22 percent in the Northeast, 29 percent in the South and 37 percent in the West. Four out of 10 foreign born residents lived in a central city with a slightly smaller number in metropolitan areas outside a central city.

According to the Migration Policy Institute several states have experienced significant growth in their immigrant populations between the periods of 2000 – 2005. The number of states with sizable immigrant populations has grown dramatically beyond the traditional states where immigrants settled previously. With rapid growth in these "new destination" states, the lack of experience in dealing with immigrants have posed both major benefits and challenges in the communities where they choose to live.

Despite some cities receiving the headlines for their restrictive policies, many local governments across the nation are working hard to integrate immigrants – without regard to their immigration status – into their communities.

In Minnesota, for instance, a series of discussions with local officials highlighted the positive effects that immigrants have had on their communities. They have reversed population declines and stabilized or even increased school enrollments. Local industrial employers rely heavily on the immigrant population to take jobs that would otherwise go unfilled. Undocumented immigrants also contribute significant spending power to the local economy.

In general, most of these residents are hard-working people trying to provide for their families and build a brighter future for their children. Many communities have established welcome centers, held diversity events, and undertaken other activities to make the new residents feel that they are a valued part of the community.

Based on our current federal immigration system, cities face a major challenge in documenting identity when needed. Local law enforcement personnel find it difficult to build trust among undocumented populations and many immigrants are reluctant to report crime or cooperate in criminal investigations for fear that their undocumented status will be uncovered and they may face prosecution or deportation. Lack of valid documentation also leaves immigrants vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous people and makes it easier for the small minority of immigrants involved in criminal activity to “hide” and even exploit others with impunity.

Local government’s primary concern is to protect the safety of all residents through engendering trust across all populations within our cities regardless of immigrant status.

According to a June 2005 report from the Pew Hispanic Center, roughly 35 percent of undocumented immigrants have lived in the US for ten years or more, 1.6 million are children, and another 3.1 million US citizen children have at least one undocumented parent. These families are forced to live underground, unable to get drivers' licenses or car insurance in most states, unlikely to obtain health insurance, and afraid to report crimes to local law enforcement.

With immigrants barred from most federal public assistance, the burden of providing social services, education and health care falls to the state and local governments, who are increasingly feeling the financial impact of both legal and illegal immigrants living in their communities.

Local governments are left with the responsibilities and the tab for providing social services, education and health care. The financial burden is exacerbated when police officers, fire inspectors, health personnel and social services personnel are forced to carry out federal functions because the federal government has not adequately funded and staffed its immigration enforcement agencies.

NLC opposes the conscription of local personnel such as police officers, fire inspectors, health personnel and social services personnel to enforce federal immigration laws. Municipalities strongly urge the federal government to not transfer the responsibility of enforcing US immigration laws to local personnel by making undocumented status in the US a criminal offense.

Because immigrants – whether legal or illegal – generally live and work in our cities and towns, new legislation to significantly improve the federal immigration system is an important issue for the National League of Cities.

NLC calls on Congress to act quickly to enact comprehensive reform of the current immigration laws to bring some sense to America's immigration policy. Comprehensive immigration reform legislation should include:

- Enforcement of existing laws: including strong worksite enforcement and accurate worker verification; increased staff and resources at the borders; increased enforcement against those individuals who initially enter the U.S. legally with student, tourist, or business visas, but remain in this country after their visas expire through increased coordination with the SEVIS and US-VISIT programs, effective enforcement of federal law that makes it illegal to knowingly hire and employ undocumented immigrants and to penalize employers significantly who continue to do so.
- Better verification systems: including a universal, reliable, effective, secure, non-discriminatory identification verification system, using the most up-to-date technology.
- Better avenues for legal immigration: including a legal means of immigration for foreign nationals who want to work here temporarily, as well as those who desire to become legal permanent residents or gain citizenship; and a "path to citizenship" for undocumented immigrants living in the United States through payment of appropriate fees and back taxes, background checks, absence of criminal or gang activity, consistent work history, and the ability to meet English and civics requirements.
- Funding to help alleviate the impact on communities including public safety, language services, housing, health, education and social services.

Our membership strongly supports a comprehensive solution for reestablishing an orderly, regulated system that serves our nation, one that protects our borders and our citizens, welcomes foreign workers that businesses need – both high and low skilled – with their families and provides a humane, reasonable path to legalization for illegal immigrants who have contributed to our communities. We look forward to working with you to enact comprehensive immigration reform.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our views.