

Statement of

**Gideon Aronoff
President and CEO
Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS)**

Before

**The Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and
International Law**

**The House Judiciary Committee
U.S. House of Representatives**

**Hearing on “Comprehensive Immigration Reform: Perspectives from Faith-Based
and Immigrant Communities”**

May 22, 2007

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law to share the Jewish community perspective on comprehensive immigration reform. My name is Gideon Aronoff and I am the president and CEO of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS).

HIAS, the international migration arm of the American Jewish community for 126 years, has assisted over 4.5 million refugees and vulnerable Jewish and non-Jewish migrants around the world by providing overseas assistance, resettlement in communities across the United States, and citizenship and other services to immigrants and refugees.

HIAS, along with our national and local Jewish community partners, has been actively engaged in advocacy in support of comprehensive immigration reform legislation to address our broken immigration system in a way that is both workable and humane. We believe that for any immigration reform legislation to fix the current system, it must include: border protection and interior enforcement policies that are effective and consistent with American humanitarian values; an opportunity for hard-working immigrants who are already here and contributing to this country to come out of the shadows, regularize their status upon satisfaction of reasonable criteria and, over time, pursue a path to citizenship; reforms in our family-based immigration system to significantly reduce waiting times for separated families who often have to wait as many as twenty years to be reunited; the creation of legal channels for workers and their families who wish to migrate to the U.S. to enter our country in an orderly manner and to work in a safe environment with their rights fully protected; and programs to enhance citizenship and encourage integration of newcomers into American society.

Today, both Congress and the Administration are working to see that comprehensive immigration reform legislation is enacted this year. The House took the first step by introducing the STRIVE (Security Through Regularized Immigration and a Vibrant Economy) Act, H.R. 1645. Introduced by Representatives Luis Gutierrez (D-IL) and Jeff Flake (R-AZ), the STRIVE Act is a bipartisan bill that seeks to address issues surrounding unauthorized migration to the United States in a comprehensive, not piecemeal, fashion by including tougher border security and enforcement measures, a new worker program, visa reforms, an earned legalization program for the undocumented with a path to citizenship; the DREAM Act which will make undocumented students eligible for citizenship and allow states to grant them in-state college tuition; AgJobs; and the Strengthening American Citizenship Act.

We're especially pleased that the bill would hasten family reunification through the reduction of backlogs and includes protections for detained asylum seekers. The bill would enhance the family immigration system, and would implement many of the recommendations made two years ago by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in its report on asylum seekers in expedited removal. For half a century, the principles of family unity and refugee protection have been the foundation of our immigration policy. This bill goes far in upholding these fundamental principles. HIAS commends Representatives Gutierrez and Flake, and all of the cosponsors, for proposing legislation that is both practical and humane.

Last week, Senators on both sides of the aisle reached a deal on immigration reform that provides a path to legalization for the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants living and working in this country, and 400,000 visas for new workers to enter the country and fill jobs that would otherwise go unfilled. We are encouraged that Senate Republicans and Democrats, along with the White House, have come together to deal with the issue of legalization and a path to earned citizenship for immigrants working and contributing to our society. It is essential that this debate move forward to address our country's pressing need for real comprehensive immigration reform.

Notwithstanding the imperative to proceed with this legislation, we are extremely concerned about the provisions in the new bill that would undercut family reunification, create a point system that undervalues the central role of family ties, and lacks a solid path to citizenship for temporary workers which could lead to the creation of an underclass of exploited workers without basic rights. While this legislation is a positive step that moves the process forward, allowing the Senate to address current problems of undocumented migration, we want to be sure that in the end Congress enacts legislation that respects families, rewards work while protecting workers, restores the rule of law and strengthens our economy, borders, and our nation.

For the Jewish community, the struggle to convert our current illegal immigration system into a legal immigration system that serves our country's and our community's social and economic interests and treats immigrants with dignity, humanity and care is an effort to fulfill the fundamental teachings of our tradition and the lessons of our history as a people of migration.

Central Jewish teachings emphasize offering welcome, protection and love for the *Ger* (stranger). This is referenced in the Torah 36 times – more than any other principle. The Jewish tradition also includes principles of Piddyon Shevuyim (redeeming the captive), Chesed (kindness), and Hachnasat Orchim (hospitality) that create a solid framework for a compassionate response to the needs of immigrants and refugees. The Jewish tradition however, has been understood to allow communities to exclude migrants from permanent settlement based on concern over adverse economic impact on the community and therefore cannot be seen as supporting an absolute right of settlement or complete open borders. Instead, the full scope of interests and community needs must be factored in to identify the “most Jewish” approach to any specific immigration question.

Along these lines, evidence continues to mount in favor of the conclusion that immigration is in our economic and national interest. The fact is that American employers need workers and are not finding them in the U.S. Between 2002 and 2012, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the U.S. economy is expected to create some 56 million new jobs, half of which will require no more than a high school education. Yet at the same time, the American labor force is shrinking. More than 75 million baby boomers will retire during that same period. Also, declining native-born fertility rates will

be approaching replacement level (stagnating), and native-born workers are becoming more educated with every decade.

Additionally, an independent task force on immigration last concluded that immigration augments and complements the workforce exceptionally well, helps the U.S. maintain a competitive edge and adapt to global market conditions, and gives our economy a particular dynamism. However, they also concluded that despite the positive net benefits of immigration, illegal immigration can have a negative impact on wages at the bottom of the pay scale.¹

The best way to reduce the negative consequences of illegal immigration is to change the system into a legal system where low skilled workers can protect their rights. This change would both improve their standing and prevent their employment from undermining the standing of native born workers.

Now I'd like to briefly discuss the role that immigration plays in the top national priority of improving security in post 9/11 America. While there have been very ugly and inaccurate attempts made to create a false impression that our immigration problems and our terrorism problems are one and the same, there are legitimate concerns that a border that is porous and a shadow society of undocumented immigrants and false documents can provide access to the United States and places to hide for terrorists and criminals.

This should be acknowledged because smart immigration policy can play a positive role in improving security on the borders and in the interior of our country. Advocates of comprehensive immigration reform should not shy away from recognizing this as a significant benefit of reform. Efforts must be undertaken immediately to provide sufficient financial, human and technological resources to help secure our borders and to create a workable employer verification system so that unscrupulous employers who wish to circumvent a new legal immigration system are not able to hire unauthorized workers.

These attempts to tighten enforcement while providing legal opportunities for the current undocumented immigrant population and future flows of immigrant workers will allow the best targeting of enforcement resources on those migrants who pose the greatest danger of terrorist or criminal connections rather than maintaining the current situation where immigration agents are forced to waste resources chasing busboys and nannies. This will also help the authorities to fight against the smugglers and document forgers who have been enriched and empowered by our current illegal immigration system.

Finally, it is clearly in our interest that our immigration system continues to deeply value family-based immigrants – a segment of our immigration system that honors both American interests and our country's religious traditions. Employment-based immigration need not be increased at the expense of family-based immigration because

¹ Convened by the Migration Policy Institute, the Independent Task Force on Immigration and America's Future was co-chaired by Spencer Abraham, a former Republican senator and President Bush's first energy secretary, and Lee Hamilton, president of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and a former Democratic congressman from Indiana. The task force issue a report titled "Immigration and America's Future: A New Chapter."

family-based immigrants also work, they fill jobs that would go otherwise unfilled, and they contribute to our economy. Proposals that restrict, rather than enhance, the ability of family members to reunite ignore the reality that family reunification is one of several root causes of undocumented migration and therefore fail to provide the long-term solution that is intended by comprehensive immigration reform and that our nation deserves.

The emphasis we place in our immigration laws on the reunification of families also makes sense in terms of helping our newcomers adapt to their new home. Family members play a crucial role in one another's lives by providing an important safety net, and helping each other adjust to their new surroundings by pooling resources and sharing responsibilities, such as caring for children and elderly parents. They take care of one another in times of economic, physical, or emotional hardships, thereby decreasing reliance on government welfare or private charities. Furthermore, it is through these immigrant family networks that the spirit of entrepreneurship can thrive and that small family businesses are created.

The proposals that seek to restrict family reunification are born from the notion of "chain migration," just as restrictionists used the term "amnesty" last year to enfeeble an earned legalization program. Yet there is nothing inherently bad about chain migration. Much of today's American Jewish community would not be here today if it weren't for chain migration, and in fact, nearly all Americans owe their American ancestry to some sort of chain migration. For the Jewish community, which has been dispersed throughout the world, America's commitment to family reunification in its immigration policy has been a beacon of hope, allowing many Jewish families to be brought back together in a nation of opportunity and safety.

Today's newcomers have the same hope. Conjuring fear of the other and sensationalizing an onslaught of immigration does not contribute to sound and humane policy making. Immigrant families are good for our economy, good for our communities, and contribute to the overall development of our nation. Any reform proposal that seeks to serve our nation's moral, economic, and security interests *must* preserve the opportunity for family reunification as the cornerstone of American immigration.

America would not be the dynamic and prosperous nation that it is today were it not for the immigrants who came and continue to come to our shores seeking opportunity and freedom. Yet today we see an anti-immigrant backlash in our communities, and sadly this is not a new phenomenon. American Jews are especially familiar with the undercurrent of fear and suspicion of newcomers that exists in our country today. The wave of Jewish immigrants to America in the early 1880's who were fleeing grinding poverty and murderous *pogroms*, anti-Jewish uprisings in Russia and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, was eventually met with an anti-immigrant backlash that resulted in the National Origins Quota of 1924, which severely restricted immigration from Eastern Europe and Russia after that time.

The twentieth century's wave of immigration, followed by the Holocaust that destroyed most of the European Jewish community, made the United States the home of the largest Jewish population in the world during the 20th century. Yet again, Jews that were fortunate enough to reach America's shores were greeted with suspicion. In 1939 a Roper poll found that only thirty-nine percent of Americans felt that Jews should be treated like other people. Fifty-three percent believed that "Jews are different and should be restricted" and ten percent believed that Jews should be deported. The United States' tight immigration policies were not lifted during the Holocaust, and it has been estimated that 190,000 – 200,000 Jews could have been saved during the Second World War had it not been for the deliberately created bureaucratic obstacles to immigration. Yet despite the suspicion with which our community has been greeted throughout our history, Jews continue to make major contributions to the cultural, scientific, political, and economic life of the United States.

America is at a crossroads: as the new Congress tackles the pressing issues facing the country today, what happens regarding immigration policy will have effects lasting for generations to come. What is needed is a careful, considered, and compassionate approach to immigration policy that incorporates the pressing security concerns of all Americans, while maintaining America's historical essence as a welcoming haven.

Unlike many circumstances where American communities face difficult choices between their deepest values and immediate interests, taking a comprehensive approach to immigration reform fulfills both our humanitarian and other interests simultaneously. The American Jewish community has joined with our other faith and immigrant advocate partners in calling on Congress to pass a humane and workable comprehensive immigration reform bill that this nation not only wants, but also deserves. The status quo of insecurity, exploitation, separation, and suffering is unacceptable, and we cannot let another year pass us by without having solved this crisis.

I look forward to working with the Subcommittee as you move forward and would be happy to answer any questions.