

Prepared Testimony of Congressman Ray LaHood
**Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship,
Refugees, Border Security, and International Law**
**Legislative Hearing on H.R. 1645,
the “Security Through Regularized Immigration and a Vibrant Economy Act”
(STRIVE Act)**

Thursday, September 6, 2007

Chairwoman Lofgren, Ranking Member King, members of the subcommittee, thank you for allowing me to testify in support of an important piece of legislation, H.R. 1645, the STRIVE Act. While the national debate on immigration is not at the forefront as it was earlier this summer, this is still a very significant issue, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak before the subcommittee.

As you are aware, I am a descendent of Lebanese immigrants. My grandparents came to this country in search of better opportunities, and settled happily alongside fellow Lebanese immigrants in Central Illinois. The fact that I am here, testifying before you today as a Member of Congress, exemplifies the contributions immigrants are making to the United States. If this nation is accepting of those who wish to contribute to society with their skills and knowledge, as it has been in the past, it is our duty to provide an appropriate and functional process for the transition and assimilation of immigrants.

I believe we are in agreement about the need to reform our immigration laws and enforcement procedures. It is clear we must assure the smooth entry of legal immigrants, better target and enforce existing visa programs addressing labor shortages, and more effectively prevent people from entering our country illegally. We have been strengthened by waves of immigrants throughout our history, and we must keep the door open and the melting pot working. However, in this era of terrorism, we must have far better control of our borders, both to protect ourselves from violence and to protect taxpayers from undue burdens. We must clarify our immigration policy, laws and procedures, and fund the resources to effectively and fairly implement it.

I believe this legislation at hand – the STRIVE Act – provides a realistic and comprehensive approach when dealing with our immigration system, which is why I support it. This bill strikes a good balance between tackling border enforcement, making the visa system manageable, and giving those who have worked hard for a life in the United States the opportunity to become US Citizens.

First, it is important that we secure our borders and stop the flood of illegal aliens who come into this country every day. This bill will help control this issue by alleviating much of the stress which has currently been placed on our borders. In order to strengthen our security presence, the STRIVE Act increases the number of border agents stationed at our borders by over 11,000 agents. It also increases other border personnel, such as port of entry inspectors, immigration and customs enforcement investigators, and U.S. Marshals by almost 4,000 officers. The STRIVE Act even requires the development and implementation of new border surveillance technology such as constant monitoring by unmanned aerial vehicles. We must remain vigilant in the war on terror, and that includes keeping a close eye on our own borders.

Concurrently, this legislation requires the development of a system for employers to electronically verify the legality of their employees, to ensure the labor they use is of valid origins and does not come from illegal aliens using forged documents. The STRIVE Act also strengthens penalties for employers who knowingly violate this system and hire illegals as employees. With the enforcement of these laws, employers will find more incentive to work through the legal channels and it will be easier to track documented workers in the United States.

While it is recognized that most immigrants come to the United States with a desire to improve life for themselves and their families, we cannot ignore the crime generated from some of the illegal aliens living here. Accordingly, this legislation also increases penalties for those who illegally enter this country or participate in gang-related activity. With further increases in penalties for those who refuse to leave voluntarily or violate the terms of their stays, the STRIVE Act then authorizes a new immigration court system and new positions for DHS attorneys.

One key reason I am supporting this bill is for the guest worker program it establishes. In order to deal with the number of aliens who seek any means possible into the United States, this bill sets up a program consisting of 400,000 new temporary guest worker visas. This will encourage both employers and immigrants to seek a lawful way into the United States. Farmers, landscapers, and the service industry will benefit greatly from this aspect of the legislation, as they often have a difficult time finding Americans who are willing to do the work and the jobs that immigrants so eagerly and diligently seek. Too many times I have had constituents in my office, asking for help to reform the guest worker programs because they cannot find employees from within the community and therefore rely on foreign workers.

Perhaps most importantly, however, this bill addresses the millions of immigrants who are currently living and working in this country but do not have a path to citizenship. Many of the aliens currently here entered the U.S. legally, but have overstayed their visas or gotten lost in the application process. These are hard workers who contribute to the economy and call the United States home. For those who have been here for several years, they have the option to get in line and apply for permanent residency. After a rigorous process of paying fines, back taxes, providing past documentation, and returning home to their country of origin, many will be considered as candidates for citizenship. To send all these guest workers and laborers back home immediately would be devastating to our economy. Finding a good compromise between awarding citizenship and imposing penalties is important, and this bill does just that.

I believe this legislation strikes the right balance between strengthening our borders, increasing the penalties for violators, rewarding those documented guest workers who have gone through the legal channels to be here, and requiring those who entered our country illegally to first return home and wait before being considered for citizenship. The vast majority of people who come to America do so out of a desire to improve their lives and are neither criminals nor a threat to our society. While we are beginning to make progress, more needs to be done promptly, both to enforce our laws against illegal immigration and to ensure the smooth entry of legal immigrants and guest workers. It is my hope that we will continue to work together for a comprehensive solution to an ever-present issue.

Thank you, Madame Chairwoman, and Ranking Member King for inviting me to present my testimony on behalf of H.R. 1645. I urge the subcommittee to support this bill.