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The White House
Office of Communications

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Remarks of Cecilia Muñoz, Domestic Policy Council Director, As Prepared for Delivery
The Hamilton Project at Brookings
National Press Club

As prepared for delivery –

Thank you. And thank you to the Hamilton Project not just for inviting me to be part of the impressive group discussing this important issue, but also for holding a forum attempting to get beyond the rhetoric to examine the character and implications of the problem. Immigration reform is all too often viewed through all kinds of lenses but rarely is it viewed through the most important one, which is a clear-eyed analysis of what's in the country's best interest. I firmly believe that if policymakers in this town were using this particular lens, the divisive debate about immigration reform would be in the rear-view mirror by now. That's why I'm grateful that you're hosting this forum today, and that you have invited so many thoughtful people to examine the question of how we can get back to building an immigration system that demands both responsibility and accountability through a comprehensive legislative reform. I'm honored to be among them.

I work on a broad range of domestic policy issues for the President; in this particular moment, in which we are recovering from a recession of historic proportions -- a moment in which we can see significant progress with so much more progress still to be made -- my job is to help advance the President's priorities, particularly those which create jobs, and strengthen our economic future.

You have heard the President talk about his vision for an economy built to last; one that creates secure American jobs. I have the privilege of serving on a team that is focused on priorities that are fundamental to that vision. Priorities like promoting clean energy manufacturing, and making sure our students and our workers have the preparation and skills they need for the jobs being created in this 21st century economy.

Immigration reform is very much a part of this mix for President Obama. Since his days in the U.S. Senate, and even as far back as his tenure in the Illinois State Senate, the President has understood that immigration reform is an economic imperative that impacts communities and families in very tangible ways. That's why as a State Senator he cosponsored Illinois' version of what has come to be known as the DREAM Act. That's why as a freshman in the US Senate he championed comprehensive immigration reform. And that's why as President he has spoken out often about immigration reform, and sought to elevate the debate on immigration policy by bringing stakeholders from diverse communities across American society together to promote mutual understanding and seek common ground.

My words today won't begin to be as eloquent as his, but the President crystallizes the essential point by calling for an immigration system that is consistent with our history as a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants. And he addresses the reality that reform is integral to our goal of promoting innovation and entrepreneurship; and it's vital to maintaining our competitive edge in an increasingly global economy.

In the speech he gave a year ago in El Paso, the President pointed out that a full 25 percent of recent high-tech startups in the U.S. were founded by immigrants. That led to 200,000 jobs here in the United States. Forty percent of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children. And immigrants are also fueling job creation by starting small businesses on main streets across the country.

The President understands that among the strongest arguments for immigration reform is that, as we grow an economy designed to be competitive across the globe, we shortchange ourselves if we continue to perpetuate an outdated and badly broken immigration system.

So from the moment the President took office, there has been no question about where we stand as an Administration on the urgency of reforming our immigration system. The challenge has been finding partners on the other side of the aisle to join the President in seeking common ground on this priority. More than three years later, this remains the central challenge.

Six years ago, the U.S. Senate passed a bipartisan, comprehensive immigration reform bill with 23 Republican votes. Today, despite the fact that some of the very same Senators still serve in that chamber -- not a single Senate Republican has been willing to engage with the President to craft a bipartisan immigration reform proposal. And while some of our friends on the other side of the aisle -- and quite frankly some in the advocacy community -- are quick to blame the President for failing to move immigration reform forward, the simple fact is that the other party has denied him even a single partner in an enterprise which requires some modicum of bipartisanship in order to make progress.

And that is not for lack of trying. The President has hosted multiple meetings at the White House with members of both parties, from both chambers, with a variety of views on how to move forward. The President has gone to the Senate Republican caucus, where he had an extraordinary and frank conversation about his interest in working in a bipartisan manner to enact immigration reform. We have prepared legislative language at the request of Congressional leaders, and developed a comprehensive policy blueprint which you'll find on the White House website.

The President has given major speeches inside and outside of Washington on this topic. He has met with stakeholders from the business community, the faith community, the labor movement, state and local government, law enforcement, and immigrant advocates to exhort them to help him lift up the issue. And we have enlisted a large cross section of the Cabinet in these efforts to press for reform and develop policy proposals that work for business, workers, and families. In fact, if you have an idea of something that we haven't done that could break the logjam, we're listening.

But we face a simple fact: no immigration bill has passed the U.S. Congress in at least a generation -- and possibly ever -- without bipartisan support. We came close with the DREAM Act in the lame duck session of 2010. It passed the House for the first time ever, and achieved a high-water mark for Democratic support in the Senate. And if 5 of the Senate Republicans who had previously voted for the proposal had done it again this time, the DREAM Act would be the law of the land right now.

The simple fact is that Republicans, including those who believe in this issue, have abandoned immigration reform and the DREAM Act. And until they find a way back to the conversation, immigration reform will remain stalled.

It is hard to overstate what the Republicans' unwillingness to engage on this issue has cost the country. First and foremost, it has undoubtedly cost us jobs. Last April, the President hosted a meeting with a range of leaders from around the country who care about this issue. He heard about the many obstacles the companies face under current law, such as one company's efforts to try to keep a valued employee who happened to be from Spain. They were ready to give up and relocate the employee out of the country - and if they had hundreds of jobs would have gone with him. The President hears stories like this over and over from business leaders as he travels around the country. We lose jobs, and we lose talent when DREAM Act students can't put the education they have earned to good use, and when foreign students at our best universities are unable to stay and put their talent to use here in the United States.

The effect of inaction is that we have a system that tolerates a large number of people here illegally, while punishing those who try to follow the rules. For example, under our existing legal immigration system, families wait intolerable periods of time in order to reunite with their loved ones in the U.S. And immigrants who have proven invaluable to the American companies that have hired them often must wait years for a green card to become available for them to stay and fully integrate into our country as legal permanent residents and eventually citizens.

Further, while Congress obfuscates, individual states have filled the vacuum with unfortunate results. Attempts at immigration control in states like Arizona and Alabama have divided communities and created controversy. They have come at a high cost, and yet accomplished nothing towards the goal of fixing what's broken about our immigration system. A patchwork of harsh laws in various states cannot result in anything resembling a coherent or effective immigration policy. For that, we need the Congress of the United States to step up and do its job.

As we seek to create the space for a meaningful debate on immigration reform, the Administration is using the administrative tools we have available under existing law to improve the processing of immigration benefits, and make sound strategic choices about how we conduct enforcement. They're not perfect tools. In fact, they're not even close -- remember that it's the law itself which is fundamentally broken - but we're making use of what we can.

USCIS has worked to reform and streamline our immigration system, making it easier for employers, immigrants and families to navigate through the bureaucracy. They have reduced barriers to citizenship by keeping citizenship application fees constant and providing tools to help applicants through the naturalization process. USCIS has also begun reducing barriers to accessing existing immigration visa programs for high-skilled immigrants, and launched the innovative "Entrepreneurs in Residence" initiative to streamline existing pathways for foreign-born entrepreneurs to come and create businesses in the U.S.

Only a few months into the Administration, DHS announced the capacity to actually let people know the status of their immigration petitions on the internet and via text message. It sounds simple, but for anyone who knows the history here, this was nothing short of a revolution. And USCIS has begun an important rulemaking process that will facilitate family immigration by addressing a serious barrier in the law which requires Americans to risk years of separation from their loved ones, particularly spouses and children, in order to process a family visa petition. By proposing to process a waiver before these

families separate, the Administration is advancing legal immigration and the reunification of families, both fundamental principles under the law.

The Administration has also taken important steps to develop a strategic approach to immigration enforcement. The results at the U.S./Mexico border have been striking. Border crossings are at a 40-year low; the border is by many measures more secure than it has ever been. It's clear that a strategic approach to enforcement at the border is having an impact. For those who have been saying we must address the border before we can talk about immigration reform, our response is: No more excuses. Let's start talking. It's time.

DHS has taken a similar strategic approach to enforcement in the interior. This approach is based on the notion that enforcement must be vigorously conducted, but it should also be strategically sound.

Enforcement is our responsibility under the law – even a law which badly needs to be reformed. But at a time when there are 11 million people living and working in the United States without proper documentation, the traditional scattershot approach – where the agency simply attempts to round up as many people as it can find – is outmoded and ineffective. Instead, DHS has taken a series of carefully crafted steps to devise a strategy for enforcement, and develop a set of priorities to guide their work.

Consistent with the best law enforcement practices and principles, DHS has prioritized for removal those convicted of serious crimes, previous deportees who have re-entered the U.S., and those who have arrived most recently. Among those with criminal convictions, DHS has further refined its priorities to distinguish the more serious offenders from others. As a result, while the number of annual deportations has remained steady, the composition of those who are removed has shifted substantially. As a result, of those removed from the country in FY 2011, 55 percent had been convicted of crimes. That represents an 89 percent increase from FY 2008, when convicted criminals represented only 30 percent. And of all removals, 90 percent fit within DHS priorities.

In addition, DHS, with the assistance of DOJ, has embarked on an unprecedented effort to review the approximately 300,000 cases in the pipeline for deportation to make sure that they are consistent with these priorities. If they are not, DHS is considering on a case-by-case basis whether to close these cases.

For the first time, there is a sense that, since it is unreasonable to expect any law enforcement agency to remove 11 million people who are unlawfully in the country, it is entirely reasonable to establish that some of these individuals are higher priorities for removal than others. As the President has pointed out, it makes no sense to be focusing enforcement resources on students who have grown up here and who seek to further their education or serve in the military. Or to separate parents from their children.

These developments have injected more coherence and rationality to the enormous task of immigration enforcement. But it is unreasonable to expect that these tools, no matter how faithfully applied, can fix what is broken about our immigration system. And it is unreasonable to expect these positive reforms to prevent injustices from occurring within the system.

For those who expect immigration enforcement to succeed in removing 11 million people who are largely integrated into our workforce and the fabric of our communities, I can tell you that immigration enforcement alone will be insufficient to fix the problem. And for those who believe it is a travesty of justice to ever separate a parent from a child, I can say that even the imposition of rational priorities to immigration enforcement will be insufficient to prevent those tragedies from occurring.

These are both symptoms of a broken system, and it is a mistake to think that administrative tools alone are a sufficient remedy. The Administration hopes to set standards for immigration enforcement that will endure and provide rationality to a necessary and important law enforcement function, and we will always look for ways to strengthen these efforts. But if we want to address the problem of illegal immigration at its core, Congress needs to accept its responsibility.

Immigration reform is a priority for President Obama and it will remain one until we get the job done.

So let me be as clear as I can be: if there's an opening, if there are partners willing to step forward across the aisle to craft a proposal that can win bipartisan support, we are ready to engage. But let's be fully transparent: even the very modest proposals that have inched forward in the last year, like a bipartisan bill that rearranges how we use the per-country caps, have stalled. And the prevailing philosophy on the other side of the aisle is grounded in the notion that we should aggressively remove as many people as possible, and pass laws aimed at making life so miserable for the remaining immigrants and their families that they will deport themselves. This isn't even a remotely credible strategy. And it comes at a very high price.

Some have offered hope that a focus on the DREAM Act might offer a way out of the morass. The DREAM Act is an Administration priority, and we note with interest the conversation about a possible alternative being developed by a single Republican senator. While we haven't seen an actual proposal, I will say to you the same thing we have said to DREAM Act students themselves: we are listening, and our door remains open to any serious partner willing to walk through it and make progress. At the same time, what we have heard so far, including from the Speaker of the House and other Republicans in Congress is that no such proposal has a chance in his chamber.

Despite the Speaker's dose of realism, what has been true for the last three years will remain true: if there is a path forward, we will find it and we will walk down it, and we will welcome as many partners as we can find. And what I can say about this President and his Administration is that Immigration reform will remain front and center as an economic imperative and a priority. We will work with any serious partner ready to make progress and fix this problem. Our existing blueprint outlines our policy preferences, but we are open to creative approaches – to any conversation that gets this going.

We will apply some basic principles in reviewing future proposals to fix our broken system. Any serious proposal should strengthen our nation economically; maximize the extent to which the people who come and live here, do it legally, by holding employers and immigrants accountable under the law; maximize pathways to earn full integration, including paying taxes, learning English, and participating fully in our civic life– because we are, and must remain, one country, indivisible; be consistent with the best values of our nation and our immigration history -- family, fairness and equity under the law; and we must secure our border using enforcement mechanisms that are both effective and humane.

We are doing this work at a time of great challenge for our country. I can point to the many ways in which the debate on immigration reform is fundamental to who we are as a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws, and to who we are as a people. How we conduct this debate says a great deal about who we are as Americans. That's why this forum today is so important. This is how we move the conversation forward; this is how we elevate the debate. This is how we create the space for Congress to move forward and act on immigration reform.

The President's voice is strong, but it's stronger when it is heard alongside others. So I ask all of you to not let this conversation end here today. The more conversations we can have like the ones we have had

today all across the country the better. It could be the real game changer that moves action forward, and to a real legislative debate on reform.

Last year in El Paso the President called on the American people to stand up and help us build a movement for reform. It's a movement that as he noted has been gathering strength from coast to coast, with people of faith, local and state law enforcement, business leaders, and regular Americans who see the same promise of the American Dream in new immigrants that someone once saw in their grandparents or great grandparents when they first set foot in this great country. So we launched a page on whitehouse.gov/immigration to ask everyone who could make the time, to set up a roundtable in their community, engage in this important conversation and to let us know how we can help move this debate forward.

One of the first folks we heard back from was Paul Bridges, the Mayor of Uvalda, Georgia. The Republican mayor of Uvalda Georgia. In a town of 600, Mayor Bridges gathered a dozen community leaders. His note to us was simple. "All I can say is IT WAS AWESOME!...People are talking and people want immigration reform." This conservative mayor in a conservative Southern State also has stood up against Georgia's anti-immigration law. He explained that it not only "runs counter to America's greatest values," these are his words, he added that it "threatens to run my town's economy to the ground."

Immigration reform is an economic imperative. The challenge laid out by the President, to create an economy built to last, an economy which protects the middle class and the pathways for those seeking to enter the middle class, is not distinct from the challenge of rebuilding an immigration system that works. And if we are going to be as successful as we must be in building the 21st century economy that ensures America's place as first in the world in innovation – as the President likes to say, the place where we develop the best stuff and build it – we must break through the obstruction in the immigration debate. Your voices are already making a difference. Let's make sure they continue to be heard. This is how we will forge our future. Thank you again.

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