Leadership Conference on Civil Rights

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NEWS RELEASE

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Civil Rights Coalition Joins Widespread Calls for Comprehensive, Fair Immigration Reform

WASHINGTON—The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), the nation's oldest, largest, and most diverse civil and human rights coalition, today urged Congress to pass comprehensive immigration legislation that includes a meaningful path to permanent residency and that ensures our immigration laws will be enforced in a sensible, humanitarian manner.

"The entire history of the civil rights movement has been based on the recognition that there can be no such thing as second-class Americans," said Dr. Dorothy I. Height, LCCR Chairperson. "Yet for too long, our immigration laws have created a two-tiered society and have perpetuated racial and ethnic discrimination."

"Immigrants play important roles in American life. Congress must protect the civil and human rights of all people in the United States as it reforms our broken immigration system," added Wade Henderson, LCCR Executive Director. "Instead, with measures like H.R. 4437, Congress appears to be heading down a dangerous and discriminatory path." The House of Representatives passed H.R. 4437, an "enforcement-only" bill, in December, 2005. It would criminalize millions of hardworking immigrants, driving them further into an underground economy, and would rob them of basic due process rights that most Americans take for granted.

LCCR is pleased to see that the U.S. Senate is currently debating a more evenhanded approach. But Dr. Height and Henderson note that the bill currently under consideration, sponsored by Senate Judiciary Chairman Arlen Specter (R-Penn.), also contains many troubling provisions that would greatly undermine the civil and human rights of immigrants.

"Chairman Specter deserves credit for trying to tackle immigration reform in a comprehensive manner," Dr. Height added. "But in a number of ways, his bill is still problematic."

LCCR urged Congress to enact immigration legislation that includes the following key elements:

• A Path to Permanent Residency: Hard-working immigrants who are contributing to this country should be encouraged to come out of the shadows and regularize their status. Forcing millions of undocumented workers to hide in an underground economy, as H.R. 4437 does, hurts the health, safety and welfare of all Americans. Proposals that would create a legal but permanent underclass would be equally unfair and discriminatory. Our goal should be to integrate immigrants into the United States, once they meet reasonable requirements like background checks and payment of back taxes. This can *only* be done by

providing them with meaningful opportunities to become lawful permanent residents and eventually United States citizens.

- Firm and Fair Enforcement: Our nation's immigration policies must be consistent with humanitarian values and with the need to treat all individuals with respect and dignity. Any proposal that would criminalize undocumented immigrants, encourage state or local police to enforce immigration laws, or penalize anyone for providing humanitarian assistance to their fellow human beings must be strongly opposed. Criminalizing undocumented immigrants or the people around them with new punitive measures will not deter illegal immigration; it will only drive it further underground. Enforcement policies should focus on the critical task of establishing a safe, orderly system of entry into the United States that meets the needs of families and businesses alike, with a priority of identifying and preventing the entry of terrorists and dangerous criminals.
- **Restoration of due process:** In 1996, Congress enacted immigration laws that drastically affected the rights of immigrants. The laws imposed an extremely harsh new system of mandatory detention and deportation for immigrants with prior criminal offenses, even legal permanent residents with very old or minor infractions. The term "aggravated felony" is now applied in immigration law to go far beyond what most members of Congress contemplated, to even include misdemeanors, and many forms of judicial review have been curtailed. Any immigration reform proposal that fails to address or even worsens the well-publicized, unfair impact of the 1996 laws would raise serious concerns. Immigrants facing deportation for any reason must have access to fair, humane and common-sense procedures.
- Family Reunification: Our family-based immigration system needs to be significantly reformed. It can often take years or even more than a decade for close relatives of U.S. citizens or permanent residents to obtain immigrant visas, which simply encourages people to overstay temporary visas or find some other way to enter the country. In order to reduce backlogs, any proposal should stop subtracting the visas given to immediate relatives of U.S. citizens from visas available to all family immigrants, thereby artificially depressing the number of visas available to other close relatives of U.S. citizens and permanent residents. We must also stop preventing U.S. citizens and permanent residents who can support their families at or above the poverty level guideline from reuniting with their families.
- A Meaningful Way to Address the Future Flow of Workers into the U.S.: Some LCCR members believe that future labor needs can be met through guestworker programs that include meaningful labor protections and provide immigrant workers with a clear path to permanent residency and citizenship. Others disagree that future flows should be addressed through a guestworker program, and believe that future workers should be admitted as full partners into our society and our workplaces through the current "green card" employment-based visa system, rather than through guestworker programs which they believe to be inherently exploitative. Under either framework, any programs designed to meet the proven needs of employers for new labor must fully protect the rights of both immigrant workers as well as those already here. A proposal that simply forces established workers to leave the U.S. after a short period of time will only encourage them to remain here illegally.