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SENATE BILL A GOOD START, BUT SERIOUS WORK LEFT TO BE DONE, SAYS HIAS

New York City - Thursday's Senate vote on Comprehensive Immigration Reform has officials at HIAS - the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society - cautiously optimistic; work, they say, is still needed before the legislation can fulfill its potential as a true comprehensive fix for America's broken immigration system.

"This vote does represent a step forward in reforming our immigration system in a constructive way," says Gideon Aronoff, president and CEO of HIAS. "But it still contains provisions that will exclude many deserving immigrants from a chance to legalize their status, complicate the implementation of many of its programs, and harm asylum seekers, refugees, and other legal immigrants."

The Senate passed the legislation (S. 2611), which contains a path to citizenship for millions of undocumented immigrants living in the United States and a temporary guest worker program. The bill diverges from the enforcement-only approach taken by the House of Representatives, which passed its own bill earlier this year. HIAS has led the Jewish community effort over the last couple of years to promote comprehensive immigration reform that is consistent with Jewish religious and ethical values of welcoming and protecting the stranger.

"We're pleased that the Senate has taken a rational and compassionate approach to fixing our immigration system, including legal avenues for immigrants to enter and work in the U.S., a way for undocumented people to come out of the shadows and earn citizenship over time, the reform of our family-based immigration system, which will reunite families more quickly, and more robust enforcement measures to hold employers accountable," says Aronoff.

But HIAS is concerned that certain provisions of the bill will prolong the detention of asylum seekers who pose no risk to national security, and will criminalize asylum seekers who, after using a false passport to flee their persecutors, enter the U.S. and later decide to apply for asylum. Moreover, with the Senate having rejected the Coleman-Leahy Amendment earlier this week, the legislation fails to address the recent "material support" problem which - over the past year - has caused thousands of refugees to be excluded from the United States for reasons which are totally unrelated to security concerns.

On a positive note, Senators Feingold (D-Wisc.) and Brownback (R-Kan.) were successful in removing a provision that would have allowed an asylum seeker to be returned to his or her persecutors while an appeal on her case is pending.

As Aronoff points out, "The Jewish community has made the protection of refugees and asylum seekers a top priority. We are heartened that some of the harmful provisions were defeated or ameliorated, but disappointed that the bill still contains provisions that undermine America's longstanding commitment to provide safe haven to those who flee persecution."

"As it stands, the bill needs more work," says Aronoff. "What we really want to see happen is that - when the House and Senate negotiate the final format of this bill - they work together to ensure the protection of asylum seekers and other vulnerable populations and make the legalization and guest worker programs as simple and fair to implement as possible."