

**Statement of Gregory Chen
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**Submitted to the U.S. House of Representatives
Immigration Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary
Hearing on The Impact of Illegal Immigration on Social Services
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Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Jayapal and members of the Committee, it is my honor to testify before the committee.

I am Greg Chen, the Senior Director of Government Relations for the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA). For the past three decades, I have advocated to improve U.S. immigration and refugee law, including five years that I spent representing children seeking humanitarian protection. AILA is the national bar association of over 16,000 immigration law attorneys and professors. Every day, AILA members help people and businesses navigate the U.S. immigration system.

Executive Summary

America urgently needs solutions to modernize its immigration system, both to address the dramatic shifts in global refugee flows and to ensure the nation's continued prosperity and economic growth.

In response to the rise in worldwide migration, the federal government must take immediate action to ensure the orderly, efficient and fair processing of newly arriving migrants. Congress should adequately fund federal immigration agencies to screen cases more quickly, to guarantee protection for those eligible for legal relief, and to remove those who are not eligible in a safe and humane manner. Essential to a fairer and more efficient process is ensuring legal representation to people facing removal.

Nationwide city officials and local NGOs are responding to the temporary needs of arriving immigrants. The lack of federal support is a major reason why localities are experiencing difficulties planning for and welcoming migrants. Congress should approve the request from city mayors¹ of both political parties to significantly increase funding for the Shelter and Services Program (SSP) that directly funds short term local support. Governments must also coordinate better and share information about the movements of migrants. Unannounced busses filled with people are unproductive political stunts that compound the challenge of welcoming large numbers of arrivals.

A critical step is to get migrants eligible to work into jobs as soon as possible so they can achieve self-sufficiency. To speed up the process, this fall federal and city officials set up work permit clinics with AILA and other volunteer organizations. The federal government should take more steps like this to streamline the work permit process.

Effective migration management will not be achieved by focusing only on the border. Congress and the federal government must also address systemic delays at all immigration agencies,

particularly U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the immigration courts, and consulates abroad. The months- and years-long case delays in nearly every immigration category exacerbate bottlenecks in border processing.² The delays even compel people with approved visas to go to the border.³

The increased arrivals at the U.S. southern border, and the dysfunction of an immigration system that has not been reformed by Congress for more than 30 years, have fueled arguments that the United States should turn away immigrants at the border.

While newly arriving migrants may need short term services, the overwhelming evidence shows that immigrants provide enormous benefits to the United States.⁴ They are a huge engine of economic growth and contribute billions of dollars in federal, state and local taxes annually.⁵ They use fewer public benefits than they contribute.⁶

Ultimately, it is the outdated and ineffective immigration system – not immigrants – that holds back the nation’s growth. Congress’s inability to pass laws that update immigration visa numbers are hurting families and businesses. American families now suffer prolonged separation as they wait months, even decades, for family visas to become available. American businesses across industry sectors are experiencing historic shortages of workers.⁷ They need people to fill positions that cannot be filled by U.S. workers. In 2022, Jerome Powell, Chairman of the Federal Reserve attributed labor shortages in part to a “plunge in net immigration.”⁸ Labor shortages are hurting economic growth. Republican Governors Holcomb of Indiana and Cox of Utah are urging Congress to bring more foreign workers to meet their states’ needs.⁹ In Florida, a lack of workers has compelled farmers to reduce production.¹⁰ Their labor challenges were made worse by a new law that makes it harder for immigrants to work in the state.¹¹

Congress can no longer put aside what it has avoided for over three decades: it must pass laws that establish adequate legal pathways to meet the country’s needs. Congress should also do what the overwhelming majority of Americans believe is the right thing: provide permanent legal status for Dreamers and others who are undocumented.¹² They have contributed to this nation for years and will continue to strengthen the nation.

Everyone agrees America needs a better functioning immigration system. A forward-thinking system that recognizes immigration’s importance to our national interest will ensure the nation’s continuing prosperity and simultaneously ensure fair and orderly management of the border.

1. Apply an “all-of-government” approach to effectively manage migration.

To ensure effective border management, Congress should begin by adequately funding all federal agencies that work on immigration so they can modernize processing, increase capacity and improve coordination. The processing of someone at a port of entry (POE) involves several agencies. Customs and Border Protection staff screen people passing through POEs; USCIS officers interview asylum seekers; and the immigration courts review and decide cases. There must be adequate resources for these agencies to ensure a fair, orderly and rapid process.

Severe gaps in agency capacity were evident during a recent AILA delegation trip to the Arizona border region. At the Nogales POE, the lack of capacity resulted in people sleeping outside the entry point turnstiles for weeks in 100-degree heat before being screened. Congress should fund

hundreds more officers and staff at ports to process people and vehicles. More capacity at ports of entry will reduce the number of people who enter between ports of entry.

Another major gap that contributes to delays at the border is the lack of adequate asylum officers to screen migrants seeking humanitarian protection. USCIS shifted resources to meet the high demand, but it needs additional funding. AILA recommends Congress fund the White House supplemental request for 1,600 more asylum officers.

Similarly, the chronic underfunding of immigration courts has contributed to a case backlog now exceeding three million cases.¹³ The backlog keeps asylum seekers waiting an average of four years for a final hearing in immigration courts.¹⁴

Effective border management cannot be achieved until Congress adequately funds all immigration agencies including those not operating at the border. USCIS, the Department of Labor, and the State Department each play an integral role in protecting our national security, identifying where foreign workers can fill critical gaps in our economy, and verifying eligibility for immigration status. Lack of funding for these agencies causes severe case delays of months and even years in every part of the immigration system: family, employment, and humanitarian cases. The case delays hurt American businesses, families, and overall prosperity.¹⁵

The dysfunctional immigration system causes bottlenecks in processing at the border. It also leads directly to irregular migration coming across the border. In November, AILA released a report, [Barriers to Immigrant Visas Driving Migrants to the Southern Border](#), with examples of people who had approved family or business visa petitions but had to wait years for a consular appointment. In desperation, these people resorted to crossing without permission at the southern border even though they were eligible for an immigrant visa.

In addition to personnel and capacity, Congress should direct more funding to combat Fentanyl and other narcotics trafficking, weapons trafficking, and human smuggling operations that present grave national security risks and jeopardize border communities. Fentanyl smuggling is overwhelmingly committed by U.S. citizens, not migrants.¹⁶

To improve border processing, federal agencies also need to operate more efficiently. For example: it takes several weeks, if not longer, for migrants' legal documents to be transmitted from CBP to the immigration courts. The delay is caused by the lack of integrated systems for the agencies to share data and provide legally required service of papers electronically. Congress can address this by investing in technology to improve the tracking of a person's immigration case from beginning to end. If these operational problems go unsolved, no proposal for shortening the time to process cases will be successful. The federal government can manage immigration to the country fairly and efficiently so long as agencies are properly coordinated, integrated and adequately resourced.

2. Provide legal representation to make the process faster and fairer.

Legal representation increases the efficiency of overall processing of immigrants through the immigration courts.¹⁷ Migrants typically have little or no understanding of complex immigration laws, or of their rights and responsibilities. This puts more work on officers and immigration judges to explain the process. These time-consuming steps are more effectively handled if people are represented by counsel.¹⁸ Legal counsel also improves compliance with the law. Represented people appear at court at extremely high rates: 96 percent of the time.¹⁹

Unless the system ensures legal representation, it cannot ensure a fair process. Immigrants with counsel who have never been detained are 3.5 times more likely to be successful in their cases; and people who have counsel and are detained are 10.5 times more likely than their unrepresented counterparts to succeed.²⁰ Without legal counsel, more people who are eligible for asylum will be denied relief and wrongly sent back into harm's way.

AILA urges Congress to pass legislation that guarantees counsel paid-for by the government for people who cannot afford counsel.

3. Support local governments and communities receiving migrants.

The federal government should provide greater support to cities that are assisting new arrivals. It is essential that Congress continue to fund the Shelter and Services Program (SSP) currently administered by CBP and FEMA. SSP provides receiving communities with resources to support new arrivals, including shelter, food, transportation, and emergency medical care. Across the country cities are counting on the federal government to provide SSP. The White House has requested additional funds for the SSP program and Congress should fund it.

In addition, the federal government should share more information with local governments and NGO service providers. For example, CBP could more accurately inform local shelters about the number of asylum seekers that will be dropped off so the shelter can prepare.

Governments officials at all levels —federal, state and local — must share information with each other about where migrants are moving or being transported. When localities are surprised by unannounced arrivals of immigrants on busses or airplanes, it is far more difficult for them to coordinate short-term shelter and assistance.

4. Improve access to work permits.

An essential yet under-emphasized issue is that newly arriving migrants whose cases are awaiting a decision need to be given the opportunity to achieve economic independence. Once they can work, people will find jobs and be more able to afford housing, thus decreasing the impact on local shelters and city governments as well as their need for social services.

The federal government should improve the efficiency of work permit processing. Under U.S. law people who have applied for asylum or who have parole or other forms of legal immigration status are eligible for work permits. But the unnecessary statutory waiting period and delays in processing work permits is preventing people from becoming self-sufficient.²¹

That's why the government officials set up emergency volunteer legal clinics to ensure people understand the law and apply for work permits and other legal benefits if they are eligible. Hundreds of AILA members in New York, Boston and other cities volunteered legal services to help people apply for work permits and get on their own feet more quickly. In October, New York Governor Kathy Hochul announced a new program to identify work opportunities for migrants who have work permits with an initial launch of 18,000 jobs.²²

To improve the work permit process, AILA endorses the Asylum Seeker Work Authorization Act sponsored by Congressman Pingree which would reduce the processing and wait times for work permits.

5. Immigrants have an overall positive impact on the economy.

Economic research has shown that immigrants of all types—low skilled, high skilled, undocumented, humanitarian, family-based, and employment-based—contribute substantially to the United States economy and help power its financial growth.²³

People who are undocumented, refugees, and recipients of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) pay approximately \$61.2 billion in federal, state and local taxes annually.²⁴ These contributions helped sustain vulnerable federal entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicare as well as vital state and local government public services, such as public education and police protection.²⁵ Estimates by the Social Security Administration demonstrate that higher levels of immigration will help keep the Social Security system solvent.²⁶

Asylum seekers contribute significantly to economic growth and tax revenue. A 10 percent reduction in asylum seekers would likely result in a \$8.9 billion loss to the U.S. economy and over \$1.5 billion in lost tax revenue over the subsequent five years.²⁷

Immigrants also play a lead role in driving entrepreneurship and innovation in economic sectors critical to 21st century economic growth. In 2022, the American Immigration Council reported that nearly half of all Fortune 500 companies in the nation were founded by an immigrant or their children.²⁸

While contributing billions of tax dollars to support activities at all levels of government, the overwhelming majority of immigrants are statutorily barred from receiving most public benefits.²⁹ Programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), non-emergency Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are unavailable to undocumented immigrants and those in the United States in temporary status.³⁰ Even for individuals entering as immigrants, U.S. law for over 25 years has barred most immigrants from federal means-tested public benefits for a five-year period after obtaining immigrant status.³¹

6. Congress must pass immigration reforms to increase legal pathways and meet the national interest.

Many systemic immigration challenges stem from Congress's failure to pass legislation creating the necessary legal pathways that match the needs of the American economy and society.

There are nearly 1.8 million individuals in the employment-based immigrant visa backlog.³² Another 8.3 million relatives of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents are stuck in the family-based backlog.³³ These backlogs are evidence that the immigration system is not meeting the needs of American businesses and families. The country is experiencing severe labor shortages that foreign workers could fill. Last year, the national unemployment rate hit a historic low of 3.4 percent.³⁴

A more functional immigration system will also improve border management. For example, southern border arrivals could be decreased if refugee admissions and other legal pathways were increased. This would allow individuals fleeing persecution to be processed without having to make a dangerous journey to the border – tragically, many Afghans fleeing the Taliban have had no other path for seeking protection in the U.S.³⁵

The Biden administration has demonstrated success reducing border arrivals by expanding the use of Congressionally authorized parole power.³⁶ In the 14 months after the creation of Uniting for Ukraine, which allowed Ukrainians to apply for parole into the United States, arrivals of Ukrainians at the southern border fell 99.9 percent.³⁷ The administration and Congress should expand the uses of parole to help manage migration flows and reduce pressure at the U.S. southern border.

Congress should streamline legal processes to lawful permanent residence for individuals who have been paroled into the United States, including Afghans, Ukrainians, and Venezuelans. Removing their cases from the asylum process would reduce the asylum backlog that takes resources from asylum officers who could process other cases, including those at the border.

Conclusion

Managing the flow of people into the United States – for family, economic and humanitarian purposes – is an interconnected system that must be solved together. It requires an efficient and orderly system that guarantees fairness and also requires compliance with the law. At the same time the system must be able to match and even anticipate the future social and economic needs of businesses and states that want and need immigrants. By harnessing immigration as a valuable resource, the United States can advance its growth and prosperity.

¹ Katherine Fung, *Republican Mayors Tell Congress to Give Biden What He Wants*, Newsweek (Nov. 7, 2023), <https://www.newsweek.com/republican-mayors-letter-congress-biden-immigration-funding-1841640>.

² See TRAC Immigration, *Immigration Court Backlog Tops 3 Million; Each Judge Assigned 4,500 Cases*, (Dec. 18, 2023), <https://trac.syr.edu/reports/734/>; USCIS, *Historical National Median Processing Time (in Months) for All USCIS Offices for Select Forms By FY: FY 2019 to 2024 (up to October 31, 2023)*, <https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/historic-pt>; Department of State, *National Visa Center (NVC) Immigrant Visa Backlog Report* (Dec. 2023), <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/visa-information-resources/visas-backlog.html>; David J. Bier, *Processing Backlogs in the U.S. Immigration System: Describing the Scale of the Problem*, CATO Inst. (Oct. 6, 2022), <https://www.cato.org/briefing-paper/processing-backlogs-us-immigration-system-describing-scale-problem>.

³ AILA, *Policy Brief: Barriers to Immigrant Visas Driving Migrants to the Southern Border*, (Nov. 6, 2023), <https://www.aila.org/library/policy-brief-barriers-to-immigrant-visas-driving-migrants-to-the-southern-border>.

⁴ See e.g., Fwd.us, *Immigration Facts: The Positive Economic Impact Of Immigration*, (July 21, 2020), <https://www.fwd.us/news/immigration-facts-the-positive-economic-impact-of-immigration/>; KelloggInsight, *Immigrants to the U.S. Create More Jobs than They Take*, Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University (Oct. 5, 2020), <https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/immigrants-to-the-u-s-create-more-jobs-than-they-take>; Greg Rosalsky, *New nation, new ideas: A study finds immigrants out-innovate native-born Americans*, NPR.org (Jan. 10, 2023), <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2023/01/10/1147391639/new-nation-new-ideas-a-study-finds-immigrants-out-innovate-native-born-americans#:~:text=The%20economists%20find%20that%2C%20between.all%20patents%20during%20this%20period.>

⁵ American Immigration Council, *Immigrants in United States of America* (2021), <https://map.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/locations/national/>.

⁶ See e.g., Mark J. Ommerborn et. al., *Assessment of Immigrants' Premium and Tax Payments for Health Care and the Costs of Their Care*, JAMA Netw Open, (Nov. 1, 2022), [10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.41166](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.41166); Leighton Ku and Brian Bruen, *Poor Immigrants Use Public Benefits at a Lower Rate than Poor Native-Born Citizens*, CATO Inst., (Mar. 4, 2013), <https://www.cato.org/publications/economic-development-bulletin/poor-immigrants-use-public-benefits-lower-rate-poor>.

⁷ Stephanie Ferguson and Makinzi Hoover, *Understanding America's Labor Shortage: The Most Impacted Industries*, U.S. Chamber of Commerce (Dec. 19, 2023), <https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/understanding->

americas-labor-shortage-the-most-impacted-industries (stating “[e]ven if every unemployed worker were to fill an open job within their respective industry, there would still be millions of unfilled job positions, highlighting the widespread labor shortage.”).

⁸ Vanessa Yurkevich, *America needs immigrants to solve its labor shortage*, CNN (Dec. 22, 2022), <https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/22/economy/immigration-jobs/index.html>.

⁹ Eric Holcomb and Spencer Cox, *To solve our national immigration crisis, let states sponsor immigrants*, Washington Post (Feb. 21, 2023), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/02/21/eric-holcomb-spencer-cox-states-immigration/>.

¹⁰ Syra Ortiz Blanes, *DeSantis immigration law may worsen labor shortages in Florida as planting season begins*, Tampa Bay Times (Sep 10, 2023), <https://www.tampabay.com/news/florida-politics/2023/09/10/desantis-immigration-law-may-worsen-labor-shortages-florida-planting-season-begins/>.

¹¹ See Christian Paz, *Ron DeSantis’s immigration law is already leading to worker shortages*, Vox.com (May 17, 2023), <https://www.vox.com/2023/5/17/23725952/ron-desantis-immigration-law-florida>; Vanessa Romo, *Why Florida’s new immigration law is troubling businesses and workers alike*, NPR.org (May 30, 2023), <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/30/1177657218/florida-anti-immigration-law-1718-desantis>.

¹² Presidents Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, *Voters Agreed on Urgent Need for Legislative Solutions for Dreamers: Recent Polling Shows a Strong Majority of Americans Across the Political Spectrum Support Action*, (Nov. 10, 2022), <https://www.presidentsalliance.org/press/voters-agreed-on-urgent-need-for-legislative-solutions-for-dreamers-recent-polling-shows-a-strong-majority-of-americans-across-the-political-spectrum-support-action/>.

¹³ TRAC Immigration, *Immigration Court Backlog Tops 3 Million; Each Judge Assigned 4,500 Cases*.

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¹⁷ See Karen Berberich and Nina Siulc, *Why Does Representation Matter? The Impact of Legal Representation in Immigration Court*, Vera Institute of Justice (Nov. 2018), <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/why-does-representation-matter.pdf>.

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²⁰ Ingrid Eagly and Steven Shafer, *Access to Counsel in Immigration Court*, American Immigration Council (Sep 2016), https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/access_to_counsel_in_immigration_court.pdf, 19.

²¹ See Chris Van Buskirk, *AG Andrea Campbell calls on feds to speed up work authorizations for migrants*, Boston Herald (Aug. 16, 2023), <https://www.bostonherald.com/2023/08/16/ag-andrea-campbell-calls-on-feds-to-speed-up-work-authorizations-for-migrants/>.

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