

COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM

NCJW Message: Since its founding in 1893, NCJW has been involved in service and advocacy on behalf of new immigrants. Today, NCJW works for comprehensive, humane, and equitable immigration and naturalization laws that facilitate and expedite legal status for more individuals. As such, we support comprehensive immigration reform that provides opportunities for hard-working undocumented immigrants to earn legal status and citizenship, expedited family reunification by reducing the waiting periods that keep immigrant families apart, establishment of humane border security policies, and policies that ensure that immigrant women and families have access to basic human services during the legalization process.

TALKING POINTS:

- ▶ **A path to citizenship must be included in immigration reform for undocumented immigrants currently living in the US.** Immigration reform should include the broadest possible path to citizenship without steep penalties or fees that would discourage immigrants without proper documentation living in the US from proceeding on the path to citizenship.
- ▶ **Immigrants, including those on the path to citizenship, must be accorded the rights and responsibilities required for full integration into American society.** Newly legalized immigrants and those on the path to citizenship should be expected to contribute to our government as lawful taxpayers. Once they are on the path to citizenship, immigrants should have access to human services such as Medicaid, food stamps, and student financial aid.
- ▶ **Comprehensive immigration reform must work for women and families, and include provisions to protect and promote family reunification.** Currently, parents, spouses, children, and siblings must wait years, sometimes decades, before they can reunite with family members in the US. Immigration reform should eliminate mandated wait times for applicants in the family visa program, include same-sex couples and their children under the definition of family, and provide legal protections for those facing deportation.
- ▶ **Immigration reform must include enforcement measures to protect the rights and working conditions of American and immigrant workers.** Low-skilled workers, fearful of deportation, must be protected from exploitation in the workplace. This is especially true for women working as domestic caregivers, who often do not have access to the same employer-based visas that are available in the traditional labor force. By the same token, our immigration system must be prepared for future immigrants and include provisions for high-skilled graduates from US colleges and universities who wish to remain in this country.
- ▶ **As Jewish women, the immigrant experience is a recent memory for many of us and our families.** As relatives of those who came to the US to escape violence or to seek a better life, we connect with immigrants today. We understand the need for comprehensive immigration reform, fair and non-discriminatory implementation of current immigration and enforcement laws, and family-based policies that reduce backlogs and promote reunification. Also, we are conscious that immigrant women face unique disadvantages and lack access to adequate health care, economic supports, and worker protections. They are especially vulnerable to violence and exploitation at the hands of employers as well as partners.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: Comprehensive Immigration Reform

Why do we need immigration reform? An estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants currently live in the United States, making it clear that our current immigration system is not working. Additionally, the backlog of applicants for employer- and family-based visas leads to waiting periods that can last years or even decades. This deters people from applying for legal residency or citizenship. Our economy and society would benefit from providing a path to citizenship that would bring those in the US without documentation out of the shadows.

What is meant by a path to citizenship? A path to citizenship is a policy that would provide a process for hard-working immigrants currently living in the US without legal documentation to gain full US citizenship. Comprehensive immigration reform must include a path to citizenship because undocumented immigrants currently live in the shadows of our legal system. As a result they are vulnerable to exploitation and crime, and lack access to basic health and economic supports despite their contributions as workers and taxpayers.

Don't we already have a process for family reunification? Our current immigration system arbitrarily ranks different family relationships that have wait times that vary from a few months to upwards of 15 years. Reform must include family-based policies that expedite family reunification and recognize same-sex couples and their children as families.

Why can't states handle immigration issues? Our constitution says that immigration is a federal government responsibility. Although some states and localities have enacted draconian laws aimed at driving away or punishing undocumented immigrants, such legislation harms the civil rights and liberties of a wider population, and potentially to racial profiling.

Why are immigrant women a particular concern? Immigrant women often bear the brunt of our broken immigration system. They are frequently employed as household help or domestic caregivers and therefore lack access to legal protection from exploitation by their

employers or the benefits of employer-based visa programs. Additionally, immigrant women are often vulnerable to domestic violence and sexual assault at the hands of partners and employers. They cannot leave for fear of losing their family visa or having their employers report them. Without legal status, they are often afraid to report abuse to authorities.

How do undocumented immigrants contribute to our economy? Many undocumented immigrants live and work in our communities. In many cases, they use an IRS-issued Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) to pay federal income taxes. In 2010, ITIN tax returns accounted for over \$9 billion in payroll tax payments and over \$870 million in income tax payments. Also, undocumented immigrants support businesses and services and pay sales and sometimes property taxes.

Do undocumented immigrants have access to government services? Undocumented immigrants – including children and pregnant women – are ineligible for some basic federal safety net supports including SNAP (food stamps), Medicaid, and CHIP. Undocumented immigrants are, however, eligible for emergency Medicaid, WIC, and some other programs. However, most immigrants who are lawfully in the US face a 5-year waiting period before being able to access benefits like food and health assistance programs. Some states currently provide in-state tuition rates to undocumented students at public colleges and universities, subject to strict eligibility criteria.

What should Congress do about immigration? In order to effectively address immigration now and for the future, Congress must enact comprehensive, humane, and fair immigration and naturalization laws that facilitate and expedite legal status for more individuals. Hard-working undocumented immigrants must be able to earn legal status and citizenship. Reform must include expedited family reunification that reduces waiting periods that keep immigrant families apart, establishment of humane border security policies, and assurances that immigrant women and families will have access to basic human services during the legalization process.