



Sisters of the Good Shepherd

The National
Advocacy Center

"[An] atmosphere of welcoming is increasingly necessary in confronting today's diverse forms of distancing ourselves from others. This is profoundly evidenced in the problem of millions of refugees and exiles, in the phenomenon of racial intolerance as well as intolerance toward the person whose only "fault" is a search for work and better living conditions outside his own country, and in the fear of all who are different and thus seen as a threat."

—John Paul II, *"Welcoming the Poor: Reigniting Hope, 1998"*

March 30, 2006

Dear Senator:

As the full Senate begins debate on immigration reform, the National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd urges you to support comprehensive reform and reject punitive enforcement-only legislation. Only a comprehensive approach will both promote greater national security and preserve the values of justice, fairness, and opportunity that have shaped the United States' tradition of welcoming immigrants.

The National Advocacy Center agrees that our current immigration system is broken—allowing workers to be exploited, separating families, contributing to the deaths of thousands of migrants at the border and facilitating illegal immigration by providing too few legal channels through which migrants can enter. In their ministries, many Good Shepherd programs witness both the human consequences of unresponsive and outdated policies and the hope that a path to permanent residency can provide.

At the House of the Good Shepherd in Chicago, a domestic violence shelter for women and their children, the ability to obtain legal status has been a critical component in helping many immigrant women escape abusive situations and become contributing members of society. With counseling, English classes, and job training, one young woman, "Felicia", was able to move from being a battered, homeless, undocumented woman to a self-confident, housed, working permanent resident because, fortunately, when she was younger, her father had applied for residency on her behalf and she was able to continue the process. Without legal residency, she would not have been able to get a secure job and would continue to live in fear in the shadows as do so many other undocumented women and families who do not currently have an avenue to adjust their status. From other programs and from the work of individual sisters, we have heard many less hopeful stories of the struggles of these hidden families and also of undocumented youth, who, though raised in this country and eager to contribute, are unable to obtain higher education or secure jobs because of their status.

These stories highlight the need for reform efforts to remain grounded in respect for the fundamental human rights and dignity of migrants and to address more than just border security in order to be effective. Acknowledging that there are no easy solutions to the problem, these principles demand a comprehensive approach to reform in which legislation must:

- Provide an opportunity for undocumented workers to earn lawful permanent residence status and, eventually, citizenship if they satisfy reasonable criteria;
- Improve the family-based immigration system and make more family visas available to reduce the current backlog and reunify families;
- Promote humane and effective border protection policies (smart screening processes, respect for due process, efficient processing, and strategies to reduce smuggling) that allow authorities to identify dangerous criminals and terrorists;
- Create greater legal avenues for necessary workers and their families to enter the United States accompanied by strong labor protections and an opportunity for immigrant workers to adjust to lawful permanent status and citizenship.
- Address the root causes of migration by supporting economic development in host countries.

The McCain/Kennedy Secure America and Orderly Immigration Act (S. 1033) best embodies the principles outlined above and we greatly appreciate the efforts of the Senate Judiciary Committee to incorporate many of that bill's provisions in its own legislation. While not perfect, the committee bill represents a much better starting point for debate. Because of our own programs' work with immigrants, the National Advocacy Center is particularly grateful that the committee bill removed provisions that would criminalize undocumented immigrants and anyone following the biblical mandate of "welcoming the stranger" by assisting vulnerable newcomers. We urge you to resist efforts to narrow the focus of the debate to enforcement-only proposals, especially those that contain criminalization provisions. We also hope that the floor debate will follow the respectful tone of the committee's bipartisan work—remaining focused on developing humane and effective policies.

Catholic social teaching, following the biblical tradition, is clear in outlining the right of persons to migrate in order to support themselves and their families and balances the right of nations to control their borders with the responsibility to seek universal common good that mandates justice and welcome for all. Only comprehensive immigration reform embodies these values and provides holistic security for our society and all of its members.

Sincerely,

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