



Statement for the Record

U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary – Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Safety

Hearing on "The Essential Role of Immigrant Workers in America"

May 12, 2021

The National Immigration Forum (the Forum) advocates for the value of immigrants and immigration to the nation. Founded in 1982, the Forum plays a leading role in the national debate about immigration, knitting together innovative alliances across diverse faith, law enforcement, veterans, and business constituencies in communities across the country. Leveraging our policy, advocacy, and communications expertise, the Forum works for comprehensive immigration reform, sound border security policies, balanced enforcement of immigration laws, and ensuring that new Americans have the opportunities, skills, and status to reach their full potential.

The Forum appreciates the opportunity to provide its views on the essential role of immigrant workers in America. Immigrants—working together with U.S.-born Americans—have long been crucial in helping to build a more prosperous country that can live up to the promise of the American dream. Now, immigrant workers have another increasingly vital role to play. This time, more than ever, immigrants can help the United States trigger its full economic potential as it recovers from the Covid-19 pandemic and faces a growing demographic deficit.¹

Immigrant workers make 17.4 percent of the labor force in the United States,² and they have played a crucial role amid the pandemic. Across numerous sectors, immigrants are doing essential work on the front lines fighting Covid-19 and keeping the nation safe.³ Immigrants—faithful to their entrepreneurial spirit—have kept our country fed, healthy, and moving forward thanks to their work in health care, food supply, transportation, and other vital jobs.

In addition, besides the pandemic, America faces another long-term problem where immigrant workers play a central role in the solution. With an aging population and lagging net immigration levels, the U.S. faces a demographic deficit in the coming years. Combined with the pandemic, this has left unfilled openings in crucial industries such as health care, agriculture,

¹ Jonathan Vespa, Lauren Medina, and David M. Armstrong, U.S. Census Bureau, “Demographic Turning Points for the United States: Population Projections for 2020 to 2060”, February 2020, Available at <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p25-1144.pdf> (Accessed on May 9, 2021).

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Foreign-born workers made up 17.4 percent of labor force in 2019”, May 29, 2020, available at <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/foreign-born-workers-made-up-17-point-4-percent-of-labor-force-in-2019.htm> (Accessed on May 8, 2021).

³ National Immigration Forum, “Infographic: Coronavirus and Immigrant Health Workers”, April 8, 2020, Available at <https://immigrationforum.org/article/infographic-coronavirus-and-immigrant-health-workers/> (Accessed on May 9, 2021).

and information technology.⁴ Immigrants are well-positioned to fill those critical shortages, whether in the labor market or the country's demographic composition.

The Forum believes that if our economy is to recover from the setbacks Covid-19 presented, we need immigrant workers operating at full steam. Hence, we urge Congress to pass immigration reforms to deal with the existence of the millions of people already living and working in the United States, many of whom are essential workers standing alongside American-born workers to help with Covid-19 response and recovery. The Forum endorses legislation that would allow essential workers—such as agricultural and health care workers—to earn permanent resident status and the possibility of citizenship.

Immigrant workers are the pillars of U.S. food security, as about three-quarters of all agricultural workers and nearly one-third of all food manufacturing workers are immigrants.⁵ American health is also heavily dependent on immigrant workers. They make twenty-eight percent of all highly skilled professionals—such as physicians and surgeons—and twenty-four percent of direct care workers—such as nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides. The immigrant workers' role is also crucial in the educational sector as they represent twelve percent of all workers in the industry.⁶

Immigrant workers are also essential to local economies. Immigrant workers pay taxes, buy local products, and run twenty-eight percent of all Main Street businesses that supply necessities—such as gas stations, grocery stores, laundromats, and restaurants.⁷ The pandemic has presented monumental setbacks and obstacles for all the United States, but the losses for immigrant-owned businesses were especially severe last year, as they dropped thirty-six percent.⁸

The road to recovery is long, but immigrant workers are essential drivers of economic growth in the United States. Whether by helping to build out critical infrastructure, serving on our front lines as soldiers and doctors, or providing for our communities as farmworkers and small business owners. When America needs a hand, it is often the immigrant population that has stepped in, happy to work in partnership to get the job done. Welcoming more immigrants has allowed us all to continue to thrive and progress.

The Forum endorses legislation that would allow essential workers—such as agricultural and health care workers—to earn permanent resident status and the possibility of citizenship. Earned legalization requires otherwise law-abiding undocumented residents to get right with the law after meeting stringent requirements, such as paying fines and taxes and passing a criminal background check.

⁴ Ali Noorani & Danilo Zak, National Immigration Forum, “Room to Grow: Setting Immigration Levels in a Changing America”, February 2021, Available at <https://immigrationforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Room-to-Grow.pdf> (Accessed on May 9, 2021).

⁵ National Immigration Forum, “Immigrants In The Essential Workforce”, May 7, 2020, Available at <https://immigrationforum.org/article/immigrants-in-the-essential-workforce/> (Accessed on May 8, 2021).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ David Dyssegaard Kallick, Fiscal Policy Institute, “Bringing Vitality to Main Street: How Immigrant Small Businesses Help Local Economies Grow”, January, 2015, available at <https://fiscalpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Bringing-Vitality-to-Main-Street.pdf> (Accessed on May 8, 2021).

⁸ Robert Fairlie, National Bureau of Economic Research, “COVID-19, Small Business Owners, and Racial Inequality”, December 4, 2020, Available at <https://www.nber.org/reporter/2020number4/covid-19-small-business-owners-and-racial-inequality> (Accessed on May 10, 2021).

Immigrant workers are playing a crucial role in the ongoing recovery from the pandemic. Thanks to their work in health care, food supply, transportation, and other vital jobs, essential immigrant workers keep our country running. As Ali Noorani—President and CEO of the National Immigration Forum — has said, “[t]o overcome this pandemic, all of us must work together and realize the promise of America; live up to the spirit of our founding ideals, the spirit of a more perfect union, the spirit of America.”⁹

⁹ Ali Noorani, “#AllOfUS are Essential to Beating COVID-19”, April 29, 2020, Available at <https://immigrationforum.org/article/allofus-campaign-statement/> (Accessed on May 9, 2021).