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FOCUSING ON THE SOLUTIONS

Naturalization and Integration: Repairing our Broken Immigration System

*In [“Breaking Down the Problems, What’s Wrong with Our Immigration System?”](#) the Immigration Policy Center laid out key structural problems **WITHIN** immigration law, as well as the inadequate, enforcement-only responses that have given rise to our current immigration crisis. Genuine immigration reform requires a thoughtful, coordinated approach that restores balance to the process, giving America the tools it needs to remain a leader in a rapidly changing world.*

Most Americans want immigrants to fully integrate in the U.S., and most immigrants want to be Americans and fully participate in social and civic life. We can expect naturalization and integration programs to be an important part of comprehensive immigration reform. Immigrant integration benefits everyone because it enables immigrants to realize their full potential, contribute more to the U.S. economy, and develop deeper community ties. While the United States encourages legal permanent residents to become citizens, there is no national strategy for facilitating integration and insufficient infrastructure to facilitate a smooth transition from immigrant to citizen. Failure to address this problem in the context of comprehensive immigration reform could lead to endless delays for the millions who currently seek services from USCIS and the millions more who will become part of the applicant pool following legalization.

Questions of naturalization and integration are unique within the comprehensive immigration reform debate because the issues involved are less about reforming existing law and more about generating support for sufficient planning and resources to create a more robust integration program. Efforts to prioritize integration and naturalization, to streamline current application processes and to revise existing policies and procedures can be accomplished through administrative action. The most urgent changes needed relate primarily to increasing the appropriations given to DHS to promote integration, improve services, and reduce the high fees applicants currently pay for immigration benefits.

A comprehensive integration strategy would provide the following benefits to the U.S.:

- Create a reliable way to welcome lawful immigrants to the U.S. and offer them information to help them navigate their way in their first years.
- Provide the government with the tools and funds necessary to ensure that people currently applying for naturalization are not harmed by a legalization program and that those who

apply for naturalization following legalization do not face needless delays.

- Ensure that immigrants who want to be U.S. citizens can do so in a timely and efficient manner, thus paving the way for their full participation in U.S. political and civic life.
- Provide USCIS with a steady, reliable funding source which allows them to better allocate funding and respond to special resource needs that arise.

The following are principles for naturalization and integration within the context of comprehensive immigration reform:

- **Develop a national integration plan.** Before comprehensive immigration legislation is enacted, the federal government should announce a coordinated strategy for encouraging integration and naturalization. Ideally, a national integration plan would be run out of the White House, and draw upon executive branch agencies such as the Office of Citizenship in USCIS, the Office of Refugee Resettlement in HHS, and the Department of Education to prioritize integration. Resources need to be invested in language acquisition, literacy, and civics education.
- **Engage in long-range planning within DHS to coordinate the flow of applications arising from comprehensive immigration reform.** Because comprehensive immigration reform envisions not only legalization of the undocumented, but reductions in existing family and employment backlogs, petitions and applications for visas and other benefits will rise dramatically. The government must be prepared to serve a variety of populations at once and must ensure that those who will be applying for naturalization in the next few years are not adversely affected by demands in other parts of the system. The government should move now to implement improvements in benefit application processing to prevent future application backlogs and to enhance customer service.
- **Ensure that the various provisions of CIR legislation complement rather than compete with each other.** Congress can ensure that legalization and naturalization functions complement rather than compete for funding by carefully thinking through the requirements for each. For example, while legalization programs have generally required applicants to prove some level of English proficiency, the measure of proficiency cannot be greater than what available services can reasonably provide. Any legalization requirements must be pegged to sufficient funding for English and civics classes. A portion of any fees or fines should be allocated to pay for such programs.
- **Create a mechanism for funding USCIS that does not rely solely on application fees.** In the context of comprehensive immigration reform, Congress must recognize the tremendous costs associated with processing millions of applicants. While applicants should be required to pay their fair share, a serious discussion about what that really means needs to take place. Ideally, USCIS should be able to rely on a combination of fees and appropriated monies to maintain high-quality services. In tough economic times it may seem counter-intuitive to ask for additional appropriations, and yet many of the costs currently borne by individual applicants are really costs that should be viewed as investments in our immigration infrastructure. At a minimum, Congress should allocate sufficient funds to help the agency cover the costs associated with building up the staff necessary for legalization, but it should also ensure that it puts into place mechanisms that will keep the agency running.

- **Engage state and local stakeholders.** State and local governments play an essential role in the integration of immigrants. A proactive immigrant integration strategy must bring together state and local stakeholders to address the needs of immigrant communities and develop strategies to integrate this population. In addition to impact aid for communities experiencing a growth in their immigrant population, the federal government must direct resources for integration efforts and programs that welcome newcomers.