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## Comprehensive Immigration Reform Absent from State of the Union February 2006

President George W. Bush delivered his State of the Union Address last night, January 31<sup>st</sup>, and discussed immigration within the context of the nation's economy. El Pueblo would like to applaud the President for highlighting the critical contributions of immigrants in the United States today when he stated that "the economy could not function without them." However we are disappointed that he did not recognize the country's need for comprehensive immigration reform or offer real solutions for our broken immigration system during his State of the Union Address on January 31, 2006. The plan he outlined in his State of the Union Address consisted of a temporary guestworker program and heightened enforcement efforts. President Bush originally unveiled this proposal in January of 2004 and has made no significant adjustments to its content despite continued criticisms of its feasibility from all sides.

### The President's Temporary Guestworker Program

The proposed temporary guestworker program would "match foreign workers with American employers for jobs that no American is willing to take<sup>1</sup>" under time restricted contracts. Guestworkers would be given visas for the duration of their employment after which they would be required to return to their countries of origin. This program would not offer an opportunity for people who contribute to the growth of our economy through this program to then apply to become legal permanent residents.

El Pueblo has serious questions about how realistic a temporary guestworker program would be when faced with the realities on the ground. What recent trends have shown is that undocumented immigrants have done what immigrants throughout our country's history have done. They have become integrated into the fabrics of our neighborhoods, schools, and churches. Their children are often born U.S. Citizens who grow up to be fully bicultural and bilingual Americans and North Carolinians. Areas have seen local economic revitalization grow alongside the development of immigrant owned small businesses. In North Carolina, Latino-owned businesses generated nearly \$2 billion in sales and receipts<sup>2</sup>. The implementation of the temporary guestworker program would require that these individuals and their families uproot themselves from their homes and their communities after living and working alongside us for years. Perhaps even more seriously, the President has not defined how he would assure the protection of workers' wages, safety and rights when their legal status lays in the hands of employers.

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<sup>1</sup> "Fact Sheet: Securing America Through Immigration Reform." (November 2005). Retrieved from [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/11/20051128-3.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/11/20051128-3.html) on January 31, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> "The Economic Impact of the Hispanic Population on the State of North Carolina." (January 2006). University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: Frank Hawkins Institute of Private Enterprise and the Kenan-Flagler Business School.

## **Enforcement**

During his address, the President briefly highlighted the need for “stronger immigration enforcement and border protection” but did not present his full proposal which includes:

- expedited removal
- increased resources in manpower, technology, and physical barriers to entry; and,
- increased worksite and interior enforcement

El Pueblo has serious concerns with continued proposals to further militarize the border when this tactic has proven to be both ineffective and deadly. Since the U.S. Border Patrol has increased its budget to over \$1.5 billion a year, the numbers of undocumented entries into the country have begun to exceed those of legal entries. At the same time, the numbers of deaths along the U.S.-Mexican border have increased to an average of more than one person per day<sup>3</sup> with a year-to-date death toll of over 460 people<sup>4</sup>. When considering that many of the undocumented immigrants entering the country are increasingly families with children, these realities become even more sobering. It is clear that enforcement issues are critical to the discussion of comprehensive immigration reform, however, it is important to note that enforcement-only efforts do not address the contributing breakdowns in the immigration system.

## **El Pueblo Calls for Comprehensive Immigration Reform**

El Pueblo calls for comprehensive immigration reform that offers real solutions for dealing with 1) the undocumented population living in the United States; 2) the future flows of workers and their families; 3) the need for tailored, targeted, effective enforcement of more realistic policies; and 4) support for the integration of newcomers in the communities where they settle.

Comprehensive immigration reform should create an opportunity for undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. to pursue a path to citizenship once they’ve demonstrated their “good faith” presence in the country. They would be asked to pay fines for their immigration violations, prove that they have paid their taxes, pass criminal and security background checks, and get in “the back of the line” to become legal permanent residents and eventual American citizens.

When recognizing the contributions of immigrant workers to our economy and our country, we should also recognize our responsibility to ensure that those same workers are offered workplace protections. Temporary guestworker programs should not place immigrant workers in the position of having to balance protecting their labor rights and workplace safety against the risk of losing an employer-controlled visa. Further, the economic and social contributions of temporary guestworkers should translate into an opportunity for them to become legal permanent residents of this country.

It should not be forgotten that the issue of immigration is not strictly an economic concern but also one of families trying to stay together. The current immigration system requires family

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.migrationinformation.org/feature/display.cfm?ID=223>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.polisci.ucsd.edu/cornelius/latimes10-1-05.pdf>

members to wait in backlogged application processes that can take 5 to 25 years to complete. Meanwhile, spouses, parents, and children attempt to live with the daily reality of that separation. We should increase the number of available family visas to move these families through the system and allow others a real opportunity to go through a safe, legal orderly immigration system.

A safe, legal orderly immigration system would alleviate the pressures currently overwhelming the immigration enforcement efforts in this country. It is not a matter of needing *more* enforcement so much as it is an issue of needing *smarter* enforcement. Comprehensive reform would allow well-intentioned immigrants to come through a legal, orderly, and efficient immigration system. If the bulk of illegal immigration was redirected into a legal immigration system, enforcement would be better able to target its efforts and resources towards the criminal smugglers, fake document rings, violent criminals, and terrorists who are the real threats to our national security.

El Pueblo honors our history as a nation that has held the hopes and dreams of immigrants seeking a better life for themselves and their families. Comprehensive immigration reform should uphold the integrity of our history as a nation of immigrants and extend an opportunity for our most recent immigrants to become new Americans. Efforts should go towards supporting access to English instruction, promoting citizenship, and providing opportunities for families to thrive in our communities.

El Pueblo will stand behind these principles for comprehensive immigration reform as the framework for developing solutions to our broken immigration system. We urge the President to lead the country and our Congress in developing strong comprehensive immigration reform that can finally offer us true, lasting solutions.

**For More Information:**

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