

## ***USCRI Statement on Senate Immigration Bill***

### **Despite Compromises, Senate Bill Provides Opportunity for Many**

USCRI applauds the Senate for passing a comprehensive immigration reform bill that, if enacted, will provide an opportunity for many immigrants eventually to apply for citizenship. The 62-36 vote for S. 2611 shows that an impressive majority of the Senate supported the President's call for a balanced, workable program that provides a path to legalization for many. "The vote itself is an indicator of how far we've come," says USCRI President and CEO Lavinia Limón. "This compromise would not have been possible without immigrants taking action to ensure their presence was counted and voices were heard."

The Senate bill creates three tiers of eligibility for the guest worker program, depending how long an immigrant has been present in the United States. Though USCRI welcomes the opportunity for more hard working immigrants to become U.S. citizens, we are concerned that the tiered approach will leave many in the shadows. The bill would enable immigrants who have been here five years or more to apply immediately; those here 2-5 years would have to leave the country to apply at a port of entry; and those here less than two years would be ineligible. Unfortunately, many mixed-status families may have to separate in order to apply for the program.

However, compromise was necessary to hold off efforts to defeat the guest worker program altogether. In that vein, the bill contains several good provisions that would help immigrants learn English and U.S. history in order to prepare for naturalization, and incorporates the DREAM Act that will enable many immigrant children to benefit from in-state tuition at local universities. USCRI congratulates Senators Kennedy and McCain who authored the initial immigration reform proposal for their hard work and dedication to providing immigrants with a legal path to work, education and citizenship opportunity.

Regrettably, the final bill excluded several important amendments that would have built in safeguards for refugees and asylum seekers. The legislation criminalizes asylum seekers who used false documents to enter the United States who do not immediately present themselves for asylum. Moreover, it does nothing to change the onerous "material support" bar for refugee admission. The bill does contain a positive measure that ensures asylum seekers and victims of torture with pending appeals cannot be returned to their home country.

The next challenge is for a House and Senate conference committee to resolve the major differences between S. 2611 and H.R. 4437, the House enforcement-only bill, which has no path to citizenship, criminalizes undocumented presence in the United States, and does not include a guest worker program. The House bill contains resources for enhanced border security, but no resources for immigration services. House Judiciary Chairman Sensenbrenner has already come out against the Senate bill. "Much work remains to be done to convince the House that it's in everyone's interest to have a workable program," says Limón.