

THE FUTURE OF OUR HOMETOWNS AND THE NATION

At Issue: IMMIGRATION

America's immigration system is broken, and the nation's cities and towns are suffering the consequences. As home to growing numbers of immigrants, cities and towns are caught in the middle of a complex national debate. The inability of government at all levels to reach consensus on a solution to immigration has created financial, cultural, and political strains in communities across America.

“This is an important issue for America’s cities and towns because immigrants live in our communities, attend our schools, and work in our businesses. We look forward to participating in this discussion to ensure that the final outcomes take into account the impact of new immigrants on our cities and towns.”

– Jim Hunt, Councilmember, Clarksburg, West Virginia

While Congress, state legislatures, and local leaders have continued to debate the issue, local institutions such as schools, businesses, local law enforcement, and social service providers have become the de facto front lines in America's haphazard response to immigration. Enactment of comprehensive immigration reform tomorrow would still leave cities and towns with primary responsibility for integrating these new residents into neighborhoods, local labor markets, and local schools – and for providing the services necessary to ensure the stability of our hometowns.

The National League of Cities believes that the federal government must lead the way in fixing America's broken immigration system by enacting comprehensive reform that combines enforcement with a path to legalization for undocumented immigrants, provided they pay the appropriate fees and back taxes and meet other conditions. The National League of Cities also calls on the federal government to provide cities and towns with the support they need to integrate immigrants into American communities.

WHERE WE STAND

Immigrants drive U.S. population growth. In 2005, one in eight Americans (12 percent) were immigrants, or “foreign-born.” By 2050, the Pew Hispanic Center estimates that number will be nearly one in five (19 percent). Of the total increase in the U.S. population from 2005 to 2050, 82 percent will be due to foreign-born residents and their descendants. The Latino population will grow from 14 percent of the U.S. population in 2005 to 29 percent in 2050. In short, immigrants – legal and undocumented – will constitute

the bulk of the nation’s population growth in the years to come.¹

The national political debate surrounding immigration has focused largely on undocumented, or illegal, immigration. Most estimates put the size of the undocumented population at between 10 million and 12 million.² According the Pew Hispanic Center, roughly 35 percent of undocumented immigrants have lived in the United States for ten years or more, and 1.6 million

1 U.S. Population Projections: 2005-2050, Pew Hispanic Center, February 2008.

2 At Issue: Illegal Immigration, Public Policy Institute of California, April 2006 and Trends in Unauthorized Immigration: Undocumented Inflow Now Trails Legal Inflow, Pew Hispanic Center, October 2008.



are children. Another 3.1 million children who are U.S. citizens have at least one undocumented parent.

on schools, health care, public safety and other local services. Local governments in cities of all sizes need assistance in facilitating immigrant integration, civic

“It is so important that we – governments at all levels – work together on this issue and work toward a broader solution.” — Conrad Lee, Councilmember, Bellevue, Washington

Local governments face increased demands, costs.

While waves of immigration make up much of the history of the United States, the current rates of immigration, the characteristics of the immigrant population, and where immigrants have settled across the country are different today than in the past.

Today’s immigrants are arriving from different countries – primarily in Latin America, Asia or Africa – with different languages, and with new and different cultural experiences than previous waves of immigrants. In addition, rather than settling in traditional gateway cities and border states that are more accustomed to newcomers, today’s immigrants are living in diverse locations across the country.

Most immigrants are contributing to the economy by paying state and local property, income, and sales taxes. In addition, immigrants contribute to local arts and culture and support the social fabric of many

engagement programs, and English language education. Municipalities also face demand for additional services in areas including law enforcement, health, and other social support programs.

Although the costs of these services are small compared to the total amounts that state and local governments pay to provide benefits to all residents, state and local governments have limited options for avoiding or minimizing these costs. Unauthorized immigrants are barred from most federal public assistance, and federal aid programs do not fully cover the costs incurred by state and local governments that provide services to unauthorized immigrants.

The gap between the costs and the resources available to local governments for dealing with immigration-related matters can be seen in the area of public safety. Under the State Criminal Alien Assistance Program (SCAAP), the federal government agrees to provide funding to state and

“Right now cities are facing immigration issues every day at the local level. We want to help mayors and other city officials by giving them special tools and resources for how to deal with immigration issues. The goal is to try to integrate immigrants into communities.”

— Ricardo Gambetta, Manager, Inclusive Communities Programs, National League of Cities

communities. Today, most new residents integrate into American society just as prior generations of immigrants did before them. Every day, most new immigrants are learning English, buying homes and properties, becoming American citizens, and becoming part of the civic life in cities and towns across the country.

There are also costs associated with immigration, however. As America’s cities and towns become more diverse, for example, they face the challenges of facilitating the integration of new immigrants into the community. Growing numbers of immigrants are settling in small towns and rural areas that are often less equipped to handle the resulting strains

local governments to help cover the costs of imprisoning illegal immigrants charged with crimes. However, state and local governments are reimbursed for just 25 percent of their costs, and the program continues to be underfunded. Ironically, this is happening at the same time local governments are under pressure from the federal government to help enforce federal immigration laws.

Local police are at the forefront of the federal immigration enforcement effort. However, a recent study by the Police Foundation found that local law enforcement officials believe that stepped-up federal enforcement efforts have backfired by making immigrants reluctant to report crimes, exposing departments to lawsuits, and putting local police officers

in confusing and dangerous situations, in addition to diverting resources from community policing.³

AGENDA FOR THE NATION

The National League of Cities supports comprehensive reform of America's immigration laws to bring some sense and reasonableness to U.S. immigration policy and calls on the federal government to:

- Support local efforts to help integrate immigrants into the community and alleviate the costs of providing services such as public safety, language services, housing, health, education, and social services.
- Step up enforcement of existing immigration laws – for example, through strong worksite enforcement, accurate worker verification, and increased staff and resources at the borders.
- Develop better verification systems for workers, including a universal, secure, non-discriminatory identification system using the most up-to-date technology.
- Create a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants living in the United States through payment of appropriate fees and back taxes, background checks, absence of criminal or gang activity, consistent work history, and the ability to meet English and civics requirements.
- Create a legal means of immigration for foreign nationals who want to work in the United States temporarily, as well as for those who desire to become legal permanent residents or gain citizenship, but ensuring that they do not move ahead of applicants with proper documentation.

“Because immigrants — whether legal or illegal — generally live and work in our cities and towns, new legislation to significantly improve the federal immigration system is a critical issue for cities and towns. The federal government needs to act quickly to enact comprehensive reform of the current immigration laws to bring some sense and reasonableness to America’s immigration policy.”

– Dennis Zine, Councilmember, Los Angeles, California

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Cities and towns across the United States welcome the diversity of cultures and nationalities that has strengthened American communities. At the same time, however, local leaders call on the federal government to adopt a comprehensive national immigration policy that reflects the economic and social realities of our nation today. With a strong and consistent national system in place, cities will no longer be left to develop a patchwork of different laws and regulations while bearing the bulk of the burden for integrating new residents and keeping communities safe.

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³ The Role of Local Police: Striking a Balance Between Immigration Enforcement and Civil Liberties. Police Foundation, 2008.

