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**BEFORE THE CONGRESSIONAL SUBCOMMITTEE ON EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT &
TECHNOLOGY**

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**“Protecting our Preparedness: Assessing the Impact of the Border Crisis on Emergency
Management.”**

Good morning, Chairman D’Esposito, Ranking Member Carter, and members of the committee. I am Murad Awawdeh, Executive Director of the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC). Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss Protecting our Preparedness here today and about our work.

Introduction: The New York Immigration Coalition

The New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC) is one of the oldest and largest immigrant rights organizations in the United States. As an umbrella policy, advocacy, coordinated services, and integration organization, we represent over 200 member agencies across the state of New York. The NYIC serves one of the largest and most diverse newcomer populations in the United States.

The multi-racial and multi-sector NYIC membership base includes grassroots and non-profit community organizations, religious and academic institutions, labor unions, as well as legal and socio-economic justice organizations. The NYIC not only establishes a forum for immigrant groups to voice their concerns, but also provides a platform for collective action to drive positive change.

New York Immigration Coalition

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Since the organization's founding in 1987, the NYIC has evolved into a leading voice spearheading innovative programs and policy, promoting and protecting the rights of immigrant communities, improving access to services, developing leadership and capacity, expanding civic participation, and mobilizing member organizations to respond to the needs of immigrant communities. Our mission as a state-wide member-led coalition of immigrant and refugee organizations is to work to transform the lives of all New Yorkers so all can thrive.

Historical and Current Migration

In the past two centuries, immigration and migration to our shores have played an important part in the development of the United States of America. Immigration to the U.S. has kept our country competitive and a leader in innovation on the world stage. Migration to the U.S. has consistently contributed to the social, cultural, and economic fabric of our country and my home state of New York. From the Frontier Expansion (1820-1880), Industrialization (1880-1920), and all the way to the Post 1965-immigration (1965-present) era. Each era brought streams of immigrants from Europe, Asia, and Latin America who contributed to the growth of this country and kept the American Dream alive.

On April 17, 1907, thousands of immigrants filled through Ellis Island's Registry Room. By the end of that day, they had set a record for the most immigrants processed in a single day: 11,747. By the end of that year, more than 1.2 million immigrants would make their way to the U.S. to build their lives here¹. Since that time, New York welcomed tens of thousands of migrants per year from the late 1990's to early 2000's². While immigrating to the United States was not quite so easy in the early 1900's, aspiring Americans didn't necessarily have to deal with the broken immigration system that exists today.

Currently, globally, individuals and families are increasingly migrating, seeking safety from violence, persecution, conflict, government collapse, and the impacts of climate change. In the

¹ **New American Economy.** (2019). Remembering Ellis Island's busiest day: How has immigration changed since 1907? Retrieved from <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/immigration-1907-v-2017/>

² **Department of Planning City of New York.** (2013). *The Newest New Yorkers*. https://www.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/data-maps/nyc-population/nny2013/nny_2013.pdf.



Western Hemisphere, there are 20 million people displaced. Those seeking refuge from Latin America and the Caribbean face extreme instability that drives the movement of people across multiple borders in search of safety. No one leaves their home because they feel safe; they leave for their safety and the safety of their families. The increase of individuals at the U.S. southern border is not unique to the U.S. More than 7.3 million Venezuelans have fled their country in recent years, with over 6.4 million remaining in surrounding countries³. Similarly, we see an increase in migration of Ukrainians across Europe, with over 6 million seeking refuge in European nations, due to the ongoing war. In the U.S., due to the success of Uniting for Ukraine, the U.S. has been able to resettle several hundred thousand Ukrainians.⁴

Immigration continues to power the U.S. growing economy, addressing our workforce needs and meeting our humanitarian obligations. Migration to the U.S. is not a new phenomenon; it is what keeps our country moving forward and honors our pledge as a beacon of light for those yearning for freedom and safety.

Social and Economic Impact

In the U.S., immigrants, with and without status, contribute some \$1.3 trillion in spending power to our nation.⁵ Immigrants make New York stronger, with an estimated 4.4 million immigrants living in our state, making up nearly a quarter of the total population.⁶ Across the state of New York, about 630,000 U.S. citizens live in mixed-status households.⁷ According to data analysis from FWD.us⁸, immigrants live in 31% of the households in New York and contribute to every sector of our economy, including 34% in the construction industry, 13% in agriculture, 25% in manufacturing, 26% in business services, and 27% in leisure and

³ **Migration Policy Institute.** Selee, A., Lacarte, V., Ruiz Soto, A. G., Chaves-González, Jesus Mora, M., & Tanco, A. (2023, April 11). *In a Dramatic Shift, the Americas Have Become a Leading Migration Destination*.

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/latin-america-caribbean-immigration-shift>.

⁴ **Department of Homeland Security.** (2022). *Uniting for Ukraine*. <https://www.dhs.gov/ukraine>

⁵ **American Immigration Council.** (2021, September 21). *Immigrants in the United States*.

<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrants-in-the-united-states>

⁶ **FWD.us.** (2023, February 17). *New York needs pro-immigrant policies to bolster its population and economy*.

<https://www.fwd.us/news/new-york-economy/>

⁷ **FWD.us** (September 9, 2021) *Immigration reform can keep millions of mixed-status families together*.

<https://www.fwd.us/news/mixed-status-families>

⁸ Custom state and district analysis provided by FWD.us based on data analysis from the 2021 American Community Survey, according to this immigration status [methodology](#).



hospitality. New York's immigrant population generates \$140 billion in annual spending power and contributes over \$62 billion in annual combined taxes. The population is well versed, with over 34% having college or advanced degrees, 67% earning two times higher than the poverty line, and 76% speaking English. Across the State, immigrants are driving our local economies. Taking a more micro-level look at NY Congressional Districts represented on this committee:

- In NY Congressional District 4, home to over 180,000 immigrants, contributing \$6.3 billion in annual spending power and pay more than \$2.9 billion in annual combined taxes.
- In NY Congressional District 1, home to over 105,000 immigrants, contributing \$4.3 billion in spending power and pay over \$2.1 billion in combined taxes.
- In NY Congressional District 10, home to over 190,000 immigrants, contributing \$8.6 billion in annual spending power and pay more than \$4.4 billion in combined taxes.

These three NY Congressional Districts contribute more taxes than the States of Alaska, Wyoming, and South Dakota collected combined in State government tax revenue⁹.

Preparedness, Management, and Solutions

As a nation, we are ill-prepared for the climate emergencies and disasters we have and will continue to face. In New York over the past year, we have witnessed devastating flooding from aged and arcane infrastructure that can't handle more than two inches of rain before flooding streets, transportation systems, and homes. This past June, I stood in Times Square waiting for my bus to go home and couldn't believe the density of smoke that had reached New York City from the eastern Canada wildfires. For weeks, the after effects of the wildfire made the air quality unsafe.

This hearing is being held to discuss the impacts of emergency preparedness and the increase of migrants arriving at the southern border seeking their lawful right to seek asylum in the U.S. As a country, the U.S. has struggled to handle most of the emergencies we have faced. Yet,

⁹ Statista. (2023, November 3). *U.S. state government tax revenue FY 2022, by state*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/248932/us-state-government-tax-revenue-by-state/#:~:text=U.S.%20state%20government%20tax%20revenue%20FY%202022%2C%20by%20state&text=In%20the%20fiscal%20year%20of,at%20117.98%20billion%20U.S.%20dollars>.



even during emergencies migrants have stepped in to help our rebuilding and recovery efforts. During Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, migrants helped remove toxic mold from hospitals and schools to restore public services to the devastated city. It took the Southern Poverty Law Center filing lawsuits against two of the largest federal contractors to fight for migrant’s fair wages and reports of abuse¹⁰. In New York, after Hurricane Sandy, I witnessed first-hand the ways in which immigrants (those with and without status) stepped up alongside their neighbors to help rebuild hard-hit communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 5.2 million of the country’s 23 million immigrant essential workforce were undocumented.¹¹ These immigrant essential workers were in critical industries like medical, agricultural, food service, and others, making up nearly 1 in 5 individuals in the total U.S. essential workforce. They remained on the frontlines of this pandemic, picking and delivering our food, treating our sick, and caring for children and the elderly as so many of us sheltered at home.

While some may say that what is happening at the southern border is taking away emergency management from more pressing needs, the federal emergency management agency isn’t coordinating a response at the southern border. While more coordination and support is needed between border and interior states from the federal government, using this moment to divide our nation instead of proposing a humane and lasting solution is counterproductive to wanting to create a humane and orderly system at our southern border.

It has been over 35 years since we reformed our immigration system under then-President Ronald Reagan, who eloquently said, *“If we ever closed the door to new Americans, our leadership in the world would soon be lost.”*

Our immigration system is arcane and now is the time; finally reform and modernize the system to create a more fair, just and equitable system, while also creating a pathway for

¹⁰ Laurel E. Fletcher, Phuong Pham, Eric Stover, and Patrick Vinck, Latino Workers and Human Rights in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, 28 Berkeley J. Emp. & Lab. L. 107 (2007). <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38JD03>

¹¹ FWD.us. (2020, December 16). *FWD.us Estimates Show Immigrant Essential Workers are Crucial to America’s COVID-19 Recovery*. <https://www.fwd.us/news/immigrant-essential-workers/>



legalization to those who already call the U.S. home. While we continue to wait to fix our broken immigration systems, there are steps the Biden Administration and Congress can take:

In the immediate, Congress should:

- Pass the Registry bill (H.R. 1511 & S. 2606), which would update the registry date and make green cards available to longtime residents without status.
- Pass legislation to eliminate or significantly reduce the delay in work authorization for asylum seekers, such as through the Asylum Seeker Work Authorization Act of 2022.
- Pass appropriations to provide case support services to connect all asylum seekers with social and legal resources and fund legal representation for indigent persons in immigration courts, before the Asylum Office, and for other immigration matters;
- In addition to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP) funding, appropriate multiyear, committed funding for sustainable, expanded capacity in border and interior communities for transitional housing arrangements to host asylum seekers who do not have sponsors immediately available. These federal contracts should go to experienced community-based nonprofits and should not pass through Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or Customs and Border Protection (CBP) accounts, nor require any form of detention;
- Appropriate sufficient funds to provide legal orientation and information to all individuals released from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) custody after arriving through a U.S. border or port of entry. Ensure that DHS works with qualified community humanitarian services providers to provide legal orientation and information in asylum seekers' best language, including Indigenous languages.
- Pass the Fairness to Freedom Act, which establishes the right to legal representation for anyone facing removal from the U.S. who is unable to afford it; and



- Defund harmful and costly ICE “alternatives to detention” that impose highly invasive surveillance and monitoring requirements like GPS tracking and ankle shackles and currently cost the government over \$300,000 per day. Instead, the administration should increase funds for the Case Management Pilot Program (CMPP) funded through FEMA, which provides community-based case management services to support immigrants undergoing asylum and other case adjudication.
- Increase Funding for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) for Employment Authorization and Other Application Processing, Backlog Reduction, and Integration Funding.
- Increase Funding for the Shelter and Services Program (SSP). SSP is a new grant-making body that supports cities, localities, and non-governmental organizations assisting newly arrived migrants. These funds are often described as a “lifeline,” supporting the provision of food, clothing, basic medical aid, legal information, and transportation support for people recently released from Department of Homeland Security (DHS) custody.

In the immediate, the Biden Administration should:

- ***Address the Humanitarian Need***
 - Develop an Emergency Resettlement Plan: In October 2022, the U.S. followed the successful program Uniting for Ukraine and began to parole those from Venezuela, Haiti, Cuba, and Nicaragua into the U.S. While that significantly eased the pressure of new arrivals at the southern border, it restricted who was able to utilize that program. The U.S. should launch a new Emergency Resettlement Plan for asylum seekers at the southern border to get the support needed to begin their new lives in a new country, which can be modeled after the hugely successful Refugee Resettlement Program.
- ***Modernize and Expedite Processing and Coordination in the Interior***



- Sufficiently fund Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) Office of Field Operations (OFO) only for processing capacity. The part of the CBP responsible for screening and processing travelers and migrants at ports of entry is the OFO (officers in blue uniforms), not the Border Patrol (agents in green uniforms). It is imperative that OFO have the funding it needs to screen and process people as they arrive at the border to seek asylum or other forms of protection.
- Coordinate the movement of vulnerable new arrivals to the U.S. Working with cities that have capacity to welcome them: The administration should coordinate transportation and support for new arrivals and not let them be used by individuals as political pawns to sow division. The administration should take active steps to help resettle vulnerable populations, by, for example, creating a task force of grassroots service providers and immigrant rights experts to work in partnership to welcome new arrivals.
- Replicate the Success of Operation Allies Welcome and Uniting for Ukraine to Modernize Border Processing and Provide Housing Supports for New Arrivals: This administration has successfully managed large-scale resettlement of tens of thousands of people from Afghanistan and Hundreds of thousands from Ukraine. The administration set up Operation Allies Welcome- a multi-agency effort- to help Afghans start their lives in the U.S. Over the past decade, the U.S. has needed to modernize regional processing centers in the border communities, where multiple federal agencies can work together with state and local officials to process mixed flows of forced migrants. Similarly, the administration safely processed 20,000 Ukrainians who came to our southern border by coordinating closely with local service providers. Instead of allowing the State of Texas to coordinate and target Cities and States it does not agree with, the administration should replicate the success of its past emergency response efforts and modernize our border processes by creating regional processing centers.



- Continue to Utilize TPS to Protect More People and Allow them to Work: The Administration should issue updated designations and new designations for countries that meet the statutory requirements for the program and are facing deadly armed conflicts, widespread human rights violations, disasters, and other humanitarian crises including El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Nepal, Guatemala, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Nigeria, and Mauritania.
- ***Increasing Legal Pathways***
 - Expedite Refugee Processing in the Western Hemisphere: Provide additional decompression at the border; the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program should prioritize admissions from the Western Hemisphere.
 - New Private-Public Sponsor Pilot: For countries where specific parole processes do not exist, such as Ecuador and Peru, where acute needs for resettlement are on the rise.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that immigrants, regardless of their immigration status, place of origin, skill level, or language proficiency, contribute significantly to making America better. The American economy and the American people agree as countless polls have shown. More Americans are good for America. We need many more immigrants if our economy is to continue to grow and lead. There are plenty of ideas for reform that simply require will, a functioning political system, and the determination to vigorously engage in public investment in the country's future workers. I strongly urge you to implement the outlined recommendations to allow our nation to remain the leader in driving the American people and the world forward.