



STATEMENT
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CONTACT Steven Weiss
(202) 480-2076 or sweiss@immigrationworksusa.org

BIPARTISAN BREAKTHROUGH, STARTING POINT FOR CONGRESS

Washington – The bipartisan Gang of Eight Senators working to craft comprehensive immigration reform are introducing legislation today, the Border Security, Economic Opportunity and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013. IW president Tamar Jacoby made the following statement.

As recently as nine months ago, today's bipartisan breakthrough was beyond imagining.

Now, not only is comprehensive immigration reform back on the agenda in Washington, but Republican lawmakers are equal partners in the effort. Momentum is building – in the Democratic-controlled Senate and the Republican House. And today, after many weeks of grueling negotiation, a bipartisan group that spans the American political spectrum has introduced what could emerge as landmark legislation.

This is a remarkable development, to be welcomed by all Americans, whatever their politics, who understand how poorly the existing immigration system serves the nation's interests – economic interests, security interests, the rule of law and our heritage as a nation of immigrants.

The proposal introduced today is an ambitious blueprint. The Gang of Eight understands wisely that reform must go beyond the millions of unauthorized immigrants living and working in the United States. The heart of reform is fixing the legal immigration system so it works for America in the future, admitting the immigrants we need and preventing future illegal immigration.

This first draft doesn't get the future exactly right, but it's a good start – a solid framework for Congress to build on in coming months.

The best way to understand the bill is as a series of balances. A humane, practical answer for 11 million unauthorized immigrants is balanced by tough-minded determination to secure the border and enforce the rule of law in the workplace. The nation's traditional commitment to family-based immigration is balanced by recognition of our growing need for foreign workers, skilled and unskilled. There is a path to citizenship, but not a special or automatic path. And a broad range of larger goals – enforcement-related and humanitarian – are balanced by cost concerns.

The Gang of Eight looked for sweet spots, and on many issues, it found them. But one critical piece of the puzzle is still out of kilter and needs to be improved as the bill makes its way through the legislative process.

The Senators struggled to reach consensus on a temporary worker program for less-skilled immigrants who come to the U.S. to fill jobs when there are no able and willing American workers. The new proposed program is a thoughtful, innovative package – vital bipartisan recognition that we need visas for less-skilled workers.

Presented as a drawing or a model without a key to indicate scale, it would inspire the highest praise.

The problem: the program is puny – less than half the size it needs to be, perhaps less than a third – and skewed by additional quotas within quotas that restrict the supply of workers to particular industries, including construction.

Why this matters: in the early 2000s, when the economy was booming, several hundred thousand unauthorized workers entered the country every year to fill low-skilled jobs for which there were not enough willing and able Americans. And if the new visa program is not ample enough, it will not succeed in replacing this illegal flow with a legal workforce.

No one – not members of Congress and not the American public – wants to have to revisit immigration reform in ten or 15 years. But that’s exactly where we will be if Congress fails to create a legal immigration system that can accommodate the country’s less-skilled labor needs – wondering what to do about a *new* 11 or 12 or who knows how many millions of unauthorized immigrants.

What’s at stake in the reform debate: not just the past – making up for decades of failed policy and its human consequences – but also the future.

Over the next two or three decades, will less-skilled immigration to the United States be largely legal or largely illegal?

The Gang of Eight has framed the question. Now it’s up to Congress to get the answer right.

ImmigrationWorks USA president Tamar Jacoby can be reached for comment at 202 480-2076.

ImmigrationWorks USA is a national federation of employers working to advance better immigration law. The network links major corporations, national trade associations and 25 state-based coalitions of small to medium-sized business owners concerned that the broken immigration system is holding back the nation’s economic growth. Their shared aim: legislation that brings America’s annual legal intake of foreign workers more realistically into line with the country’s labor needs.