

Statement of Chairman Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.)
“How Comprehensive Immigration Reform
Should Address the Needs of Women and Families”
Senate Judiciary Committee
March 18, 2013

Today the Committee will examine ways comprehensive immigration reform can address the needs of women and families. For years, long visa backlogs in our immigration system have prevented families from being together. An estimated 4 million close family members of U.S. citizens and green card holders are waiting to join their relatives in America. Some of these families, predominantly from Mexico and the Philippines, have waited more than 20 years to be reunited. This is simply unacceptable. While preserving family unity is a core tenet of our immigration policy, our broken immigration system is instead hurting families. This has devastating consequences, especially for the women and children who bear the brunt of the unsettled environment our immigration system causes.

New immigrants often face the reality of spending prolonged periods of time without their loved ones because the broken immigration system has little to no flexibility. Beyond that, it is punitive to families seeking to lawfully enter the United States because lawful permanent residents must wait over two years to be reunited with their spouse or children. Newly naturalized citizens must wait over seven years to be reunited with their adult children and over ten years for their siblings.

I believe that families should be protected. Our immigration system must honor the love that binds spouses and children. It should come as no surprise when spouses, desperate to reunite with their loved ones, overstay a tourist visa or cross the border without authorization.

It is time for us to proceed in a comprehensive way that protects families. The “enforcement first” mentality that so often guides this debate must be met with the facts: The President and Secretary Napolitano have done more in the administration’s first four years to enforce immigration laws and strengthen border security than in the previous administration’s entire eight years. We have done enforcement first and sadly, enforcement only. It is time to capitalize on this progress and bring families out of the shadows to remove the cloud of uncertainty and fear that needlessly blankets their lives.

Changes to our family-based immigration policies are not just the right thing to do for moral reasons; they would also be good for the economy. Our policies too often provide a disincentive for immigrants to put down roots, establish stronger connections in their local communities, and become full-fledged Americans. We cannot continue to expect the best and brightest in the world to come to America and contribute if they cannot bring their families. Our system must catch up to the demands of a 21st century economy, and not remain a relic of the past.

And family unity in our immigration policy should include all families. Last month, for the fourth straight Congress, I introduced the Uniting American Families Act, which grants gay and lesbian binational couples immigration rights heterosexual spouses have long enjoyed. This bill would end a destructive policy that rips families apart and forces hardworking Americans to make the impossible choice to leave the country they love and start over in another country that

provides immigration protection for their relationship. Frances Herbert and Takako Ueda are two Vermonters who know first-hand the harm caused by this discriminatory Federal policy. Gordon Stewart is another Vermonter, who testified before this Committee about the heart wrenching decision to leave the country he loves to be with the person he loves. There are countless others in this same situation across the Nation. I will continue to fight on their behalf. No American should face such a choice.

We need to fix our broken immigration system. As we consider comprehensive reform, we must not pit visas for family-based immigrants against those sponsored by employers. We can and must find a way to balance these priorities to promote economic growth, strengthen the lives of individuals, protect families, and provide equal protection under the law for all people residing in America. We have an historic opportunity to get this right. It is time for intelligent, common sense reforms to our immigration system.

I thank Senator Hirono for chairing this important hearing today and focusing on how our current system tears families apart. I know her unique personal experience will contribute greatly to the debate next month as we consider comprehensive immigration reform in the Senate Judiciary Committee.

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