
(April 10, 2006) LIPINSKI COUNTINUES TO SUPPORT SECURE BORDERS AND LEGAL IMMIGRATION

Lipinski Statement on Border Security and Immigration Reform

WASHINGTON, DC - "The United States has long been a beacon for all those around the world who yearn to breathe free, who come here for a shot at achieving their dreams. I have always believed that legal immigrants are important members of our local communities in Illinois. I have held several immigration seminars in my district and have worked to help many people become citizens. For those legal immigrants who dream of becoming American citizens, I will continue to work to make those dreams come true.

However, I also believe that a nation that does not control its own borders is not secure. We need to know who is coming into our country, and we need to prevent unauthorized people from entering. With 500,000 or more individuals entering illegally every year, the status quo has become unacceptable.

Prior efforts by Congress to control immigration, including the reforms enacted in 1986 and 1996, failed for lack of meaningful employer sanctions. As a result, many undocumented workers have been used and abused by their employers, driving down wages, benefits, and working conditions for all workers. The border security legislation that I voted for, H.R. 4437, addresses this issue by requiring employers to verify a job applicant's eligibility for lawful employment with immigration and Social Security officials, rather than through merely a cursory look at documents that can be easily forged. In addition, the bill doubles the fines for employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers to a minimum of \$5,000 for a first offense and up to \$40,000 for subsequent offenses.

The lack of security on both our northern and southern borders is a grave national security threat to America, and our inability to control who crosses our nation's borders is no longer acceptable. H.R. 4437 would put more inspectors and canine units at border crossings; would require the construction of security fences, lighting, and cameras along certain portions of the U.S. border, and would authorize and reimburse local sheriffs in the counties along the southern border to enforce the immigration laws and transfer illegal aliens to federal custody.

An obvious gap in our nation's homeland security efforts is the "catch and release" program, in which illegal immigrants caught at the border from countries other than Mexico (Mexicans caught at the border are already immediately deported) are released into the U.S. once they promise to return for a court date. Not surprisingly, over 75 percent never show up in court and then remain in the country illegally. H.R. 4437 works to address this problem by requiring that all illegal immigrants apprehended at U.S. borders must remain in custody until they are removed from the United States or are legally admitted to the country.

Critics of the border security bill argue that its security provisions are too tough. They reject legislation based on strong enforcement and security, arguing that all that is necessary is a guest worker program and amnesty. I admit that H.R. 4437 is not a finished legislative product, and I did not support every provision in it. But it has initiated a long overdue

debate in Congress on immigration.

I am not convinced there is a labor shortage that requires an additional 550,000 or more guest workers every year, as envisioned by the McCain-Kennedy immigration reform bill, which also allows family members to come along, doubling or tripling the number of new arrivals. To the extent there may be shortages in particular industries, employers could increase wages and improve working conditions to attract legal workers. Only after improving wages and working conditions and proving that no Americans are available for the job should an employer be able to recruit guest workers.

I am concerned that guest worker proposals will continue to erode the wages and working conditions of tens of millions of American citizens and legal immigrants. The Commission on Immigration Reform, created in 1995 by President Bill Clinton, reported that "guest worker programs have depressed wages" and reduced employment opportunities for "unskilled American workers, including recent immigrants," who can be easily "displaced by newly entering guest workers." Other studies, including research by the National Research Council and the liberal Economic Policy Institute, show immigrants employed under guest worker programs are paid 15-33 percent less than American citizens, even in highly skilled jobs, driving down wages for all workers.

All workers deserve the protection of labor laws and strong enforcement of these laws is essential. While, existing guest worker programs already nominally provide such protections, most are not enforced. After years of half-hearted efforts, the lack of enforcement has reached crisis proportions under the current administration. I do not believe that will magically change under a new guest worker program.

I also do not support amnesty proposals that treat every immigrant the same, irrespective of how long they have been here or their contributions to the community. It makes no sense to treat someone who just entered illegally last week the same as someone who has been in the country for a decade or more, gainfully employed and paying taxes, with children who are American citizens.

Currently, more than four million potential immigrants around the world are waiting for their paperwork to be processed so they can enter the U.S. legally. It will be years (in the case of Mexico and the Philippines, often ten years or more) before they can enter the country under current quotas. Blanket amnesty for the 11 million already here illegally could delay or prevent the legal immigration of those who are complying with the law. I cannot support legislation that would hurt families following the rules established for legal immigration.

Over the last few months, I have had frequent discussions with a wide array of people, all having different points of view on this problem. While I may not have a complete solution, I have come to the conclusion that just implementing a new guest worker program and blanket amnesty will not solve the problem of illegal immigration, and nor will a solution that focuses solely on border security. Increased border security and interior enforcement, including employer sanctions, should be the foundation of any comprehensive solution, and I will continue to participate in this discussion to find a good and meaningful policy solution to this difficult issue."