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Citizenship essential for true immigration reform

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BY SUSANA BARCIELA
sbarciela@aijustice.org

My mother brought me to Miami when I was 4 years old. I didn't know it then, but I was a Cuban refugee. Within months of my arrival, I was speaking English with a young girl who lived nearby. By the time I discovered McDonald's around the corner, my assimilation was well under way.

Living in the immigrant capital of the world, I've seen Miami grow into a vibrant economic and cultural hub. Watching the Miami Heat play in the NBA Finals, I marveled at the spectacular views of downtown Miami. I also knew that immigrants played an enormous role in this growth and prosperity.

Now I work at a nonprofit law firm that helps undocumented immigrants. Many of our clients have survived treacherous journeys, life in the shadows and worse. Yet they educate themselves, work hard and raise American children. Even without legal papers, they contribute to their communities and the land they have adopted.

"Maria," for example, was among a group of Mexican women who were promised legal jobs in the United States. Instead, they were forced into slavery and prostitution. If she resisted, her life was threatened. After police found them, the women were detained five months by immigration officials. High hopes of America had turned into their worst horror. Then our firm, Americans for Immigrant Justice (AI Justice), secured Maria's release and got her a work permit. She started cooking and cleaning in a restaurant. She then became the cashier. Later she was promoted to store manager. Meantime, she testified four times in the U.S. Senate.

Juan Gomez was 2 years old when brought to Miami from Colombia. Soon after graduating from high school, he was roused from his sleep by immigration agents in 2007. He became the face of the Dream Act when his friends launched a Facebook campaign. Juan was in danger of being deported when AI justice secured his release. Since then, he has been profiled in a Washington Post Sunday Magazine cover story and graduated from Georgetown University magna cum laude. Now he works for J.P. Morgan in New York City.

Many other immigrants who invested their talent and sweat in this country already have been deported since the last failed effort to reform our immigration system in 2007. Heartbroken U.S. citizen children and spouses have been left behind. Beyond the inhumanity of tearing families apart, the country suffers economic losses. What happened when Alabama passed an anti-immigrant law is only one example. Tens of thousands of immigrants fled the state, and farmers watched their tomatoes rot on the vine.

Clearly, the sensible approach is to reform our broken immigration system. Congress is now attempting to do just that. At the heart of the bill is the pathway to citizenship, which potentially could legalize 11 million aspiring Americans. That pathway is key to bringing good people out of the shadows, where they can fully leverage their talents and achieve the American Dream. Ultimately, their successes will contribute to our economy and communities.

Last week, the Senate made history by passing a bipartisan immigration-reform bill. Now it is up to the U.S. House to deliver. Unfortunately, some Congress members will try to place unreasonable obstacles in the path to reform. One example is enhanced border enforcement language included in Senate Bill 744. At a time of net-zero border crossings and record-high deportations, these provisions needlessly would put border enforcement on steroids at a cost of \$30 billion. Other proposals would relegate certain immigrants to second-class legal status. That is fundamentally un-American. It also would significantly lessen their potential economic and social contributions.

Miami is a testament to what immigrants can accomplish.

Since the 1960s, waves of immigrants have come here from Cuba, Haiti, the Americas and across the world. They took low-wage jobs, learned English, built businesses, taught their kids the value of education and work and turned Miami into a modern metropolis.

For this virtuous cycle to work well, a full-fledged path to U.S. citizenship is essential. Congress must not shortchange the immigrants waiting in line to strengthen our country.

Susana Barciela is policy director of the Miami-based organization Americans for Immigrant Justice.