

**Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee,
On President Obama's Executive Action on Immigration
Senate Floor
November 20, 2014**

Tonight, President Obama will speak to the American people about reforming our broken immigration system. He is expected to announce what he can do to address some of the problems that are tearing families apart, dragging our economy down, and risking our national security. Because for two years, the Speaker of the House of Representatives refused to even allow a vote on the Senate's bipartisan bill, I understand and appreciate his decision to act.

Currently, there are more than 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States. We simply are not going to round up and deport 11 million people. That is impractical, hugely expensive, and most importantly, it is un-American. These are mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters. The President's actions will acknowledge that reality. These actions are a necessary step in the effort to bring people out of the shadows, to focus scarce enforcement resources on those who actually pose a threat, and to bring some stability to those who are hardworking, law-abiding members of our communities.

The President's action is no substitute for legislation. It is a temporary and incomplete solution. Congress can – and must – step up and fix the broken immigration system once and for all. But to those who say that he should wait for Congress to act, I say we have waited long enough. We have been waiting for years.

When I came to the Floor in June of last year urging this body to pass the Judiciary Committee reported bipartisan immigration bill, I spoke of the last time comprehensive immigration reform was considered by the full Senate. It was the summer of 2007, and our efforts were being blocked by the Republican minority. My friend, Senator Kennedy, spoke with disappointment, and resolve. He said:

“A minority in the Senate rejected a stronger economy that is fairer to our taxpayers and our workers. A minority in the Senate rejected America's own extraordinary immigrant history and ignored our Nation's most urgent needs. But we are in this struggle for the long haul. . . . As we continue the battle we will have ample inspiration in the lives of the immigrants all around us.”

He was right. We drew on that inspiration last year as the Judiciary Committee held days of hearings and lengthy and extensive markup sessions, working late into the evenings debating the bill and considering hundreds of amendments. More than 300 amendments were filed. We adopted 136 of them. All but three were bipartisan. What was initially a proposal from the so-called “Gang of Eight,” became, through the Committee process, the product of 18 members from both sides of the aisle. The Senate Judiciary Committee recommended this improved bipartisan bill to the full Senate. It was not the bill I would have drafted, but it was a fair and reasonable compromise and reflected our deliberative process at its best.

But Republicans in the other chamber chose to block our bipartisan solution. They would not even allow a vote on the bill, and the Republican House leadership shut down similar bipartisan efforts in that chamber. To this day, they are batting zero when it comes to truly addressing the broken immigration system.

They now complain that the President is acting alone, but he is not. The American people support immigration reform. A bipartisan majority of the Senate has endorsed action. It is the obstructionist House of Representatives that is out of step. Our system will not fix itself, and it should be no surprise that the President has decided to use his authority to make our country safer, stronger, and more humane. If Republicans really, truly want congressional action on reforms, they can take action, right now, today, and simply allow a vote on the Senate-passed bill.

The President has the legal authority to take this action. Every president since Eisenhower has exercised this authority and some, like President George H.W. Bush, did so on a sweeping scale. While Congress makes the law, the President sets enforcement priorities. He clearly has the power to focus scarce resources on identifying and deporting those people who pose a danger to our communities. And he can limit the deportation of those who are law-abiding and productive members of our communities. Such action does not grant citizenship to the undocumented. It is only a temporary fix. But when, time after time, our efforts to find a permanent solution are blocked, it is a reasonable, appropriate, and necessary step to take.

Today's announcement is a reminder of the work that remains to be done to achieve meaningful immigration reform. Because at the core of this debate are people – families seeking security and the promise of America. It is about children whose parents want what any parent wants for their child – the opportunity to succeed, to prosper, to live in a free, open, and welcoming society.

Next week, millions of families in this country will gather around a table to give thanks for the many blessings they have received. The President's actions will be counted among them for the millions of loved ones who worry that their mother, father or grandparent could be deported at any moment. The security that the President's action will give to these families is powerful and indispensable.

For some, it is about something even more urgent. It is about seeking safety. While I applaud the President's announcement today, I remain deeply disappointed by his decision to build a large new detention facility to hold vulnerable women and children fleeing violence in Central America. Many of these individuals are asylum seekers, not criminals, and their ongoing detention is unacceptable. I urge him to revisit this policy.

The action the President will announce today will draw criticism from those who have sought to stop immigration reform at every turn. But after years and years of obstruction, he is right to take action. When the American people see punts from House leaders on immigration reform day after day, week after week, month after month, they start to wonder if Republicans are serious about ever doing anything to fix the broken system, or if they are just content to complain

about it. At the heart of it all, this is about keeping American communities strong and vibrant. We benefit from immigration. That has been our history and it should be our future.

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