

Testimony of Astrid Silva

“Keeping Families Together: The President’s Executive Action On Immigration And The Need To Pass Comprehensive Reform”

Senate Judiciary Committee

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Madam Chairwoman, distinguished members of the Committee, good afternoon. Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today to discuss an issue of great importance to my family and to so many families in the United States. My personal story is not unique, and is typical of millions of immigrants here today. That is why I also want to thank this Committee for working so hard on a comprehensive immigration reform bill last year. I watched from the gallery as the Senate voted on that historic bill and believed that we were one step closer to real change.

Like many before them, my parents—one of whom is here with me today – came to this country and chose to leave everything behind in search of a better life for their children. When I was just four years old, my parents brought me across the Rio Grande in a homemade tire raft. I still have a vague memory of that day. I was holding onto my doll so tight, because I was so afraid of what was going on. I remember looking down knowing I would be in trouble because I had gotten mud on my new patent leather shoes. Moving to the United States provided many wonderful things for my family, including my little brother who was born in California in 1993. For me, the only home I know is Las Vegas.

I grew up believing that I was just like everyone else. The only difference was that when I was little, kids made fun of me because I didn’t speak English. I learned English three months after starting school because of the dedication of my parents and their desire for me to do better. When I was in middle school I received many prestigious honors at my school, but still my parents were afraid to let me sign up for a magnet school that I had my heart set on. They believed that the school might ask me for my social security number and that might alert immigration officials that I was here without documentation. But a teacher who believed in me encouraged me to apply, and with her help I did, and was accepted. That school, Atech, was everything that a nerd like me could dream of. I excelled and thought I was just like my classmates, until the time came to apply for colleges. I knew that my status meant I couldn’t drive because I couldn’t get a license without a social security card. But I hadn’t understood that being undocumented would hurt my future. I graduated high school in 2006 when immigration reform failed and immigration raids were taking place all over the country. My guidance counselors told me it was the end of the road for my academic career. I had worked so hard. I had good grades and all kinds of extracurricular activities. At my high school graduation, when my friends were called on stage and the school they were going to was read out loud, along with which scholarships they had received, I was devastated. I knew I could not have any of that because I didn’t have a social security number.

In 2013, when I received my DACA, my life changed completely. Some things were simple. I could get my driver's license. I could get a job. Most importantly, I could go to school and live without fear of my own deportation for the first time in my life. I could focus on my future and contributing to the only country I have ever called home.

By my fear didn't end completely. I am still afraid that my mom and dad will be deported. Even though we have lived for more than 22 years in the same house, in the same neighborhood, and in the same community, I am afraid that one day I will come home and they will be gone. That our lives will be turned upside down. That we will be torn apart and separated. No matter how many degrees I am able to get, what will happen if I have to walk across a stage to no family members? My parents are hard-working. They are good people who want nothing more than the opportunity to work hard and watch their children grow up and be happy. My dad works long hours in the Las Vegas heat where it can get upwards of 120 degrees and he doesn't complain. In his free time he collects pop can tops to raise money for Ronald McDonald House. My mother has become the community mom and volunteers at a number of local non-profit organizations.

My family knows firsthand the value of the President's new executive action. Several years ago, my father was detained by immigration enforcement officers. It was the most traumatic experience of my life. In an effort to get right with the law, my dad had paid a *notario*, someone he thought was a lawyer, to file an immigration application. Unfortunately, like so many other people, we were taken advantage of. She took advantage of my dad's lack of immigration knowledge and never told us that his application was denied. She dragged us along telling us that immigration just takes a long time in the United States, while draining our life savings. As a result of that experience, my dad was issued a deportation order and picked up for detention. He is just one of thousands of parents who have been separated from their children. My family spent one week without my dad, and it was the longest week of my life. We didn't know what would happen to him or to us. When we were told he would be deported and that I could give him a 10 pound bag with toiletries I wondered, how can the country we love so much be brought down to a 10 pound bag? My brother who is a United States citizen felt like his country betrayed him. "Astrid," he asked me, "how can they do this to my dad?" I understood that I may not have rights because I am undocumented, but my brother was born here, he has lived here his entire life. He is as American as any of the Senators in this room. He couldn't believe they could take his dad.

The latest efforts by President Obama will keep my family together. It will keep millions of families together. Of course there are many, many more that it will not help. I have many friends whose parents will not qualify, I have many friends who do not have children and therefore don't qualify. I feel tremendously lucky that first I, and now my parents, fall into categories of people that can be legally protected if we meet certain qualifications. But so many of those countless others who aren't so lucky, are really just like us. They are people that like my family are only making our country a better place. They volunteer in our communities, go to church with us, go to school with us. They have jobs and take their responsibilities seriously. We must continue to work with Congress to pass a permanent legislative fix to our country's broken immigration system so all mothers and fathers can be with their children.

The bi-partisan Comprehensive Immigration Reform package that passed the Senate in 2013 was certainly not perfect, but it was a fair—and permanent—fix to this problem. I, and many of my peers, will continue the fight to pass a bill. But in the meantime, we will also fight to protect and defend the President's action. When people attack the President for this action or challenge his legal authority, they are attacking me. They are attacking my mother. They are attacking the hundreds of thousands of children who need their parents to care for them and tell them that there are no monsters under the bed. They are attacking workers who are contributing to our economy. They are attacking me with every word that they say. They are not attacking a stranger, they are attacking the girl who sits next to your grandson in Chemistry class; they are attacking the man who spends his days making sure your roses are beautiful every spring; and they are attacking everything that has made our country strong.

Every one of you on this committee has a great responsibility bestowed upon you by the citizens of our country. I hope that you will see that this action not only helps make our country a stronger nation, it also demonstrates what the United States stands for, the American Dream, the belief that if you work hard you will be able to provide for your family and live without fear of persecution.