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Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Immigration and the National Interest
“The Impact of High Levels of Immigration on U.S. Workers”
March 16, 2016

Questions for the Record: Senator Amy Klobuchar

(1) Question for Mr. Johnson:

Last Congress, I was proud to support the comprehensive immigration reform bill that passed the Senate along with many of my colleagues from both parties. Unfortunately, the House rejected that strong, bipartisan measure. I am hopeful, however, that the issues we are now facing can be addressed through comprehensive action. Not only is that important for the immigration system as a whole, but it also makes good economic sense. A report from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office showed that comprehensive immigration reform would reduce the deficit by \$158 billion over the next 10 years and increase the nation’s gross domestic product by 3.3 percent. Why it is important to address immigration through comprehensive reform?

Response from Mr. Johnson:

Thank you, senator, for this important question. As the executive director of the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA), I hear about the difficulties my members encounter when they are navigating through our outdated immigration system on behalf of their clients. The type of immigration cases AILA members handle run the gamut from family to business to refugee/asylee to deportation, in other words, anything and everything that touches immigration law, my members have seen it. As you know, the last major overhaul of the legal immigration system took place over 25 years ago, so it is no wonder that the entire system needs to be updated.

I agree with you, senator, that the best way to address the need for reform is through comprehensive action. We cannot address one slice of the immigration system and expect to see the type of positive impact outlined in the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) report that you mentioned. The immigration system is massive, involving no less than four cabinet-level departments and their various component agencies. Additionally, there are numerous stakeholders with a strong interest in seeing our immigration system reformed, including immigrant rights groups, business and labor groups, law enforcement agencies, not to mention the American people. Given those factors, it’s clear that the best, but certainly not the easiest, way to approach this endeavor is to do it comprehensively.

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Broadly speaking, I see the key elements of any comprehensive reform plan as including: 1) creation of a path for the undocumented to eventually gain lawful permanent status, 2) creation of new legal channels for workers in low- and semi-skilled occupations, 3) expansion and improvement of legal channels for temporary high-skilled workers, and 4) reduction of the years-long backlogs in certain the family-based and employment-based green card categories. Comprehensive action would also entail enforcement reforms to crack down on criminal smugglers and unscrupulous employers as well as provide fair and just proceedings in immigration courts. These elements are interconnected and therefore must be addressed in a comprehensive manner. For example, you cannot crack down on unscrupulous employers by implementing a new mandatory internet-based employment eligibility verification system until the situation of the currently undocumented population is addressed; if you did so, it would severely disrupt the economy and tear families apart. Another example of interconnected elements is that without the creation of new legal channels for workers in low- and semi-skilled occupations, our nation would continue promote the conflicting messages of “Help Wanted” and “Keep Out.” New channels to enter the United States would provide a legal way for needed workers to come and help grow our economy.

There is no doubt that our 1990’s immigration system must be overhauled and recalibrated to meet the realities of the 21st century which can only be done by creating a system that better matches today’s economic and societal needs. Moving comprehensive reform legislation would not be a simple task but as you have indicated, you and your Senate colleagues in a bipartisan fashion, were able to pass S.744, the comprehensive immigration reform bill three years ago, proving that it can be done. The key elements that I have outlined were all part of S.744 and were vital to the CBO’s analysis of the bill’s positive economic impact. We must redouble our efforts to comprehensively reform our immigration system.