

Testimony of

The Honorable David Roefaro

July 26, 2011

Testimony From Utica, NY Mayor, David R. Roefaro July 26, 2011

Thank you for having me here today. I would like to begin by thanking the Chairman, Senator Schumer, and the Ranking Member, Senator Cornyn, for inviting me to speak before this committee today. I would also like to thank the members of this subcommittee for your hard work and commitment to fixing and reforming our nation's immigration policy. The work in front of this subcommittee has the potential to leave a lasting legacy for our country.

Many years ago, my family lived in Italy. They struggled for jobs and economic opportunity. Seeking a better life, they came to America, where the streets were paved with gold and there was a chicken in every pot.

When they came to our country, my family sought a community that would give them those opportunities. They chose the beautiful city of Utica, New York. After coming to Utica, they laid roots, raised a family, established a small business and became an active part of the city. They had the opportunity to live the American dream.

Today, that simple dream is threatened. The dream of so many to come to America and find the streets paved with gold has become vulnerable to fear. In times of economic downturn, like our country now faces, we begin to fear that which we do not know. And many choose to point the blame for our economic problems on immigrants. But to deny those who want to come to America and create a new life for themselves would be to deny our own history. Our country was built on the backs of immigrants. From the young Irishmen who built the Erie Canal across New York to Bosnian families seeking political refuge and starting small businesses in Utica today, immigrants have been the key to our past success and will serve as a catalyst to both Utica's and certainly our nation's future.

But, do not mistake my words: while immigration is crucial to the social and economic fabric of our country, we need to work harder to ensure it is done legally. We need to make sure our borders are secure. We need to keep our communities safe and keep criminals off our streets.

As the Mayor of Utica, I have spent the last four years trying to make life a little better for those who live in my city. One of my top priorities has been to help refugees assimilate, offer them a stake in our city and show them how they can assist us in growing our local economy and creating jobs- all things I have worked to accomplish.

Utica has benefited from recently welcomed immigrants from Bosnia, Belarus, Russia, Somalia, The Dominican Republic and Vietnam. Groups like this enjoy assistance from our local refugee center, a center that has helped transition so many. In my city, there are 42 languages spoken in our school district and centers like the Mohawk Valley Refugee Center help connect the dots for immigrants so no matter how you say it, 'We're in this together' is a motto everyone lives by.

Yes, our economic growth is tied directly to how we as nation utilize the talent of immigrants. And there are statistics to back those words up. Nationwide, cities with growing immigrant populations have the fastest economic growth. Immigrants, by making our economy more productive, contribute over 37 billion dollars to the wages and output of native-born Americans. Between 1995 and 2005, 25 percent of all high-tech startups were founded by immigrants. These

new Americans paid over 162 billion in federal, state, and local taxes, proving their worth to our communities.

In Utica, economic success stories mirror national ones. Take Zaim Dedic for example. Zaim came to Utica at the age of 14 from Mrkonjic Grand, a small town in the Serb Republic. Today, at barely 30, he's built himself a business. He is the founder and owner of Multilingual Interpretation Services.

Moving forward, it is important we all work together to create an innovative solution to immigration reform. For those who are here in our country illegally, we must create a path for them to become citizens. Through a tough but fair process including security checks, payment of back taxes, and an educational requirement to learn English, we can begin to assimilate now-illegal immigrants into our country and cultivate their economic potential.

Moreover, my experience as a Mayor working on national issues has showed me how this issue, this debate, is likely one of the most important facing our nation. I proudly profess our immigrant populations have added to the vibrancy of the City of Utica. Their presence has been vital to our housing stock, our city culture, our regional economy and even our local agriculture- The refugee and immigrant community is actively involved with community gardens introducing and harvesting varieties of bountiful, fresh and healthy foods into my county. Certainly, their presence remains crucial to the development and growth in every part of Upstate New York. The national importance of this issue is why I am a proud member of the Partnership for a New American Economy -- joining over 300 other mayors and business leaders from across the country who know that smarter immigration will generate economic growth and create new American jobs.

As we go forward in this process and create a new immigration policy for our country, we need to remember our heritage- the reason we all sit here today. We are a nation of immigrants and we must preserve this legacy into our future. When my own family came to America, they came in search of a better tomorrow. It is my hope that we can ensure another generation of immigrants come to this country accepted, assisted and empowered to dream the never impossible dream. I appreciate the opportunity to address you today and will gladly answer any questions you may have. Thank you.