

Testimony of

# **The Honorable Paul Bridges**

July 26, 2011

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**Mayor, Uvalda, Ga.**

**Before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees and Border Security**

**Committee on the Judiciary**

**U.S. Senate**

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Good morning Chairman Schumer and subcommittee members. Thank you for this opportunity to speak.

My name is Paul Bridges and I am mayor of the small town of Uvalda, an agricultural community in southeast Georgia. I am also a plaintiff in a lawsuit challenging Georgia's new anti-immigrant law. I am here today to speak about this new law and how it is affecting my town. Uvalda's story is a microcosm of the national debate about immigration. Like other states, Georgia passed a law that would supposedly address illegal immigration. Among other things, it gave local police the power to question residents about their immigration status during a traffic stop. It also made it a crime to give a ride to an undocumented immigrant if you commit another crime as innocuous as having a burnt out headlight, or even to invite an undocumented immigrant to stay in your home.

The reality is this law won't solve the immigration problem in the state. It will only devastate local economies. It will burden communities with the cost of enforcing a law designed to create a climate of fear. Even though parts of the law were blocked by a federal court, its impact can already be seen in my community and other farming communities across Georgia. We have no assurance that the block will hold.

Uvalda is a small town of about 600 people, but many more call themselves Uvaldians because our address reaches into adjoining Toombs County. Throughout the Uvalda address are neighborhoods where Latino immigrants live. We grow many different crops year round, including the famous Vidalia onion. These crops are harvested by skilled migrant farm laborers who have harvesting down to a fine art. The Georgia peaches, strawberries, blueberries and many other fruits and vegetables they harvest ends up on family dinner tables across the country. We have a multi-million dollar pine straw industry that will be just as devastated.

These workers are a critical part of Georgia's economy. Their work helps agriculture to inject \$6.85 billion into Georgia's economy.

These workers also contribute to local economies as consumers, too. Every time they buy a good or service, they pay the same taxes that I pay. Many own their own homes and pay property taxes. Their taxes are co-mingled with my taxes and are used to pay for schools and public services. The loss of their tax revenue will be felt in Georgia.

But this law puts these workers - and Georgia's economy - squarely in its crosshairs. Anyone who looks foreign will be under suspicion. Immigrant workers - regardless of immigration status - have already left the state rather than deal with the racial profiling this law will encourage. They don't want to live with the fear that their family will be torn apart because a family member

couldn't produce the right papers at a traffic stop.

Now that migrant workers are fleeing Georgia, perfectly healthy crops have been left rotting in the field. The Georgia Agribusiness Council has already reported that farms have lost \$300 million due to a lack of workers. The economic toll could reach \$1 billion.

This hits home for many small farms around Uvalda. When crops are left in the fields, farmers don't get paid. Some fear the inability to re-pay a federal loan. They are unable to meet their families' needs. And they're not spending money and contributing to the area's economy. If the farms are producing less, it also means consumers are paying more for the produce that makes it to the supermarket.

But this misguided law hurts Uvalda in another way. It imposes a significant burden on our area's resources. It forces local law enforcement agencies, with untrained officers, to use its resources to enforce immigration laws. It distracts officers from their real mission of protecting residents. No family with an undocumented member will dial 911 to seek police help or medical attention. Also, when officers arrest people for alleged immigration violations, they have to house these detainees somewhere. Uvalda, nor Montgomery County, has a jail. We will have to rent space in the jail of a nearby town - another drain on my town's resources. The bottom line is that Uvalda - like so many towns dealing with these anti-immigrant laws - will take a major economic hit and will no doubt be less safe as a result.

There are so many wonderful things about the town of Uvalda. It's a friendly place where our residents know each other. If a person needs a ride to the grocery store, church or doctor, I give them a ride. I don't ask to see their papers first.

In the past, when people needed a place to stay, I opened my home to them - regardless of their immigration status. I know that I am not the only person in my town. But, under this new law, Good Samaritans face fines and jail time. Grandparents who have an undocumented in-law on an overnight visit become criminals. Spouses become criminals. Citizen children become criminals. This law threatens the very fabric of our little town.

Many folks have been surprised that a conservative Republican mayor like me is involved in this lawsuit against my state. But it shouldn't be that surprising. This law isn't immigration reform.

This law is government intrusion of the worst kind. It threatens our economy. It threatens our way of life. And it simply makes no sense. Famous Republicans understood immigration. Sonny Purdue warned incoming Republicans to not give in to the "gang-type mentality that could be harmful to those "who want the American dream." and, after the law passed, he said, "the GOP needs to ensure that "people of color and people who are not U.S.-born" feel welcome."

The Assistant Georgia Attorney General defending this law before Judge Thrash in the hearing to determine if the law should be blocked said that this law may be unkind; it may be unfair. She then acknowledged that an 18-year-old citizen driving his undocumented mother to the grocery store could be arrested. The Assistant Attorney General made the argument that under Georgia's new law, that 18-year-old's "crime" is the equivalent of helping his mother sell cocaine. Judge Thrash then asked the Assistant Attorney General whether this law would " ... create an immigration enforcement policy by each municipal and county law enforcement agency." Judge Thrash's questions and the Assistant Attorney General's troubling response highlight the need for comprehensive nationwide immigration reform; solutions that keep immigrants and people like me from facing a patchwork of confusing and inhumane enforcement regimens across states, counties, and even towns.

I want real immigration reform that upholds our core American values of fairness and equality. And I want real immigration reform that recognizes the economic contributions immigrants

make to this country every day. The truth is immigration reform is an economic necessity. It is crucial for our national security, and our national leaders from both sides of the isle know it.