

*Senator Hirono Opening Statement*

Hearing before the  
Senate Committee on the Judiciary  
On  
“Comprehensive Immigration Reform”

Wednesday, February 13, 2013  
Hart Senate Office Building, Room 216  
9:30 AM

Thank you Chairman Leahy and Ranking Member Grassley for holding this important hearing on comprehensive immigration reform, an issue about which I care deeply.

Immigration reform should be rooted in a set of guiding principles to ensure that our immigration system addresses the critical needs of our economy, while maintaining the nearly 50-year tradition of bringing families together.

There is a huge backlog in our legal immigration system. These backlogs have prevented Filipino Veterans of World War II, men who fought for our country, from reuniting with their children for decades.

We now consider how to address the numerous problems in a large and complicated system. To bring the millions of undocumented out of the shadows so that they can contribute to our society fully. To reduce and eliminate the backlogs in family-based immigration. And to reunite the Filipino veterans of World War II with their children.

I know many of my colleagues have highlighted the importance of providing green cards to STEM graduates of U.S. universities. I agree that we should not educate foreign students and then send them away to work for foreign competitors of American companies. It only makes sense to keep that talent here. However, we should not shift the purpose of immigration to the United States away from a family focus towards an employment focus. In advocating for more employment-based immigration we should not get tunnel vision and forget the human element of immigration. We should be looking to expand the opportunities for families to be reunited and kept together – and this should include LGBT families.

The needs of employers are important in this debate. But I believe that family-based immigration is essential to ensuring the continued vitality of the American economy. The success of immigrants in this country is often the success of immigrants with their families. Families provide American workers with a support network and social safety net.

I am also concerned about how women and children are treated, both in our current immigration system and under any reforms we put in place. Female immigrants and unaccompanied minors face unique circumstances that are often lost in this debate that focuses on enforcement and the job market. For example, a woman who stays at home as a domestic worker could fall through the cracks and be denied legal status if she suffers the loss of her husband or becomes a victim of domestic abuse.

Our immigration policies should allow for discretion in dealing with vulnerable populations. This should include how we treat families and children in our enforcement and detention system. But it should also include how we design an earned legalization program to be inclusive of women and children under immigration reform.