

**Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),  
Ranking Member, Senate Judiciary Committee,  
Hearing on “Immigration Reforms Needed to Protect Skilled American Workers”  
Tuesday, March 17, 2015**

Almost two years ago, the Senate came together to pass comprehensive legislation to reform our broken immigration system. The bipartisan Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act (S.744) took meaningful steps to help U.S. businesses fill critical job needs, while ensuring protections remain in place to help and train American workers. Importantly, it did so while focusing on our broken immigration system as a whole. The Senate bill acknowledged that we can only modernize our complex immigration system if we also work to reunite families, address decades-long visa backlogs, and, above all, create an attainable path for the millions of people who already call this country home to become full and lawful participants in our society.

Today’s hearing focuses on problems with the H-1B and other visa programs that are used to bring high-skilled workers into the United States. I and many other Senators have heard consistently about the need for improvements to these programs to ensure that U.S. companies can attract world-class talent and continue to lead on the global stage. We have also heard troubling stories of abuses that have caused the displacement of American workers. These visa programs must be used to complement the U.S. workforce, not displace it.

One topic that I hope will be discussed during this hearing is the meaningful contribution that immigrant workers make to the U.S. economy, and the ways in which a healthy immigration system can grow the country’s economic base and create jobs that benefit all Americans.

Today, we will hear from a witness who shares such a story: Bjorn Billhardt came to the United States as a high-school exchange student, later earned degrees from the University of Texas and Harvard Business School, and subsequently stayed in the United States to start a successful education business that now employs over 40 people. Mr. Billhardt’s experience illustrates the value of an immigration system that welcomes diverse backgrounds and keeps promising graduates of our universities here in the United States, where they can contribute to our culture and our economy.

Some of the witnesses today will speak about concerns with the H-1B program. I share many of those concerns, and agree they must be addressed. In fact, many of those concerns were directly addressed in the bipartisan comprehensive immigration legislation this Committee approved and the Senate *passed* last Congress. That bill contained vital measures to improve the functioning and administrability of the H-1B program. It included important provisions to protect both foreign and American workers from exploitation and displacement. Many of those measures were added to the bill by this Committee after hearing testimony from some of the same witnesses and organizations that appear before us today.

While I did not agree with every provision in S.744, I respected the bipartisan compromise the Senate achieved through a deliberative and thoughtful process. Forty-two witnesses testified before this Committee on the topic of immigration reform during the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress. With the

full participation of all members of the Judiciary Committee, and with unprecedented transparency and fairness to all in offering amendments, we held several public markups to consider comprehensive immigration legislation. We considered 212 amendments, and we adopted 136 of them – all but 3 on a bipartisan basis. The Judiciary Committee reported S.744 with a bipartisan vote of 13-5, and the full Senate, after further debate and amendment, passed the legislation with a strong bipartisan vote of 68-32.

The bill was a landmark achievement not only for this thorough process, but because of its comprehensive approach to fixing our broken immigration system. Piecemeal efforts are an inadequate solution for a system as complex and interconnected as our immigration laws. We need an immigration system that lives up to American values: one that not only ensures that America can access the best talent to remain competitive and at the forefront of innovation, but also allows families to be reunited and respects the diversity and inclusion that has made our Nation great. We need an immigration system that treats individuals with dignity and respects due process rights and civil liberties. One that shields the most vulnerable among us, including children, crime victims, asylum seekers, and refugees. And, finally, one that will reinvigorate our economy and enrich our communities through meaningful and comprehensive reform.

I hope that this hearing focuses on constructive solutions about how to reform an immigration system that those on all sides acknowledge must be fixed. I look forward to learning what those who voted against much-needed reform last congress will propose as a comprehensive solution to our broken immigration system this year.

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