



December 19, 2023

The Honorable Mike Johnson  
Speaker of the House  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries  
Minority Leader  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Johnson and Leader Jeffries,

The undersigned county elected officials are leaders in their communities and members of the National Association of Counties (NACo) Immigration Reform Task Force - which is comprised of county officials from across the nation who evaluate how federal immigration policies impact county governments. With the current negotiations around our nation's border security, we would like to highlight the comprehensive, bipartisan Dignity for Immigrants while Guarding our Nation to Ignite and Deliver the American Dream (Dignity) Act of 2023.

The DIGNITY Act includes funding for strengthening border trade, security, and management, as well as critical reforms to our nation's immigration system that would provide much-needed assistance to counties who are struggling with migrant influxes, relieve pressure off of local law enforcement, and strengthen local economies. County government officials stand ready to work with our federal partners to craft and pass a comprehensive immigration reform bill that includes long-standing county priorities, such as provide a pathway to citizenship for DREAMERS, streamline the H-2A guest worker program, reduce visa backlogs, codify the Shelter and Services program, as well as strengthen our economy and bolster the safety and security of our communities by modernizing ports of entry.

America's counties support the following provisions and provide the following recommendations for the Dignity Act:

**Division A: Border Security for America Act**

**Codify the Shelter and Services Program:** Counties traditionally provide health, self-sufficiency, and social services to persons residing within our boundaries. While we recognize the Shelter and Services Program (SSP) is not a long-term solution, it is critical that counties and non-profits continue to receive SSP funding to address the immediate needs in our communities.

**Strengthen Border Trade, Security, and Management:** Many economies of our nation's border counties rely on the efficient flow of commerce and people through ports of entry. Counties support the construction of new ports of entry, expansion of vehicle, cargo and pedestrian inspection lanes, and modernization of existing ports of entry including enhanced procurement of technology for inspecting and processing traffic passing through ports of entry and hiring of additional U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) personnel. By conducting more thorough inspections at ports of entry, the trafficking of illicit materials will be also curtailed at our border, relieving pressure off of local law enforcement.

**Decrease the Error Rate of E-Verify Systems Before Implementation:** While counties understand the importance of U.S. employers ensuring that workers are legally authorized, E-Verify is not a perfectly functioning system.

Prior to the nationwide implementation of E-Verify, counties urge that the Social Security Administration and U.S. Citizenship and Services (USCIS) collaborate and focus to reduce the error rate for the E-Verify system.

#### **Division B: American Dream and Promise**

**Codify the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Program:** The cultural, economic, and social contributions of nearly 600,000 DACA recipients and their families should be addressed as the country modernizes our immigration policies. Some 300,000 DACA recipients work in industries with labor shortages, including healthcare, business services, and education. Each year, DACA recipients and their households pay \$6.2 billion in federal taxes and \$3.3 billion in state and local taxes on top of payroll tax contributions to Social Security and Medicare. After taxes, DACA recipients and their households have a combined \$25.3 billion in purchasing power to put back into local communities. Counties strongly support conditional permanent resident status and protection from deportation for individuals who entered the U.S. as children and have been continuously present in the U.S.

#### **Division D: American Agricultural Dominance Act**

**Streamline and Simplify the H-2A Agricultural Guestworker Program:** Farmers and ranchers – both in rural and urban counties – rely on the crucial contributions of workers participating in the H-2A agricultural guestworker program, which plays a vital role in sustaining the economic health of the United States agriculture sector. However, the complexity and restrictions of the H-2A program frequently pose challenges for counties, impeding the ability of farmers and ranchers to retain the workforce necessary to support the agricultural industry effectively. Counties support the simplification and modernization of the H-2A agricultural guestworker program by:

- Requiring the U.S. Departments of Homeland Security (DHS), Labor (DOL), Agriculture (USDA), and State to **establish an electronic platform that serves as a single point of access** for DHS, DOL, State Workforce Agencies (SWA), State and CBP to complete the H-2A process
- **Removing seasonality requirements** and making the H-2A visa program available to both seasonal and year-round agricultural employers, allowing the Dairy Industry and others to participate, and
- **Opening the H2A program to new industries** such as forestry- and land management, cider pressing on farms, aquaculture, fish or shellfish processing, and equine management.

**Create Pathway to Obtain Permanent Legal Resident Status for Farmworkers:** Half of the nation's hired farmworkers, roughly 1.2 million individuals, lack legal immigration status. Counties support the creation of a new certified agricultural worker (CAW) status for currently unauthorized farmworkers and allowing CAW workers to adjust to lawful permanent resident (LPR) status after following certain requirements.

#### **Division E: American Prosperity and Competitiveness**

**Reduce Visa Backlog:** U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is currently facing a backlog of nearly 5 million applications, as of December 2022, preventing qualified applicants from receiving employment authorization to bolster local workforces. Further, the lack of a digitized system and access to electronic application materials increases delays and processing times. Counties support efforts to safely reduce the visa backlog to a maximum of 10 years by providing necessary funding to USCIS, State, and DOL.

**Provide Visas for Those with Advanced Degrees from American Universities:** Counties support improved and efficient legal and consistent avenues for immigrants to contribute to our nation's workforce and economy.

Specifically, counties support allowing Ph.D. graduates in science, engineering, mathematics, or technology (STEM) from American Universities to be eligible for an O-Visa and to have the ability to use their talents in high demand STEM and healthcare fields.

Given the central role of counties in ensuring the health and safety of all members of our nation's communities, we are important stakeholders in bipartisan discussions related to federal immigration policies. America's counties stand ready to work with Congress to ensure a bipartisan, comprehensive immigration package that advances the interests of the communities we serve is signed into law.

Sincerely,



Commissioner David Stout  
El Paso County, Texas  
Chair, NACo Immigration Reform Task Force



Supervisor Luis Alejo  
Monterrey County, California  
Vice Chair, NACo Immigration Reform Task Force



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Hennepin County, Minnesota  
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Commissioner Christa Yoakum  
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Commissioner William Miller  
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Vice Chair, NACo Immigration Reform Task Force



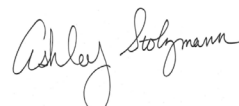
Assessor John Wilson  
King County, Washington  
Vice Chair, NACo Immigration Reform Task Force



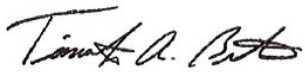
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