



AMNESTY REVISITED

GETTING TO THE TRUTH — AND THE HEART — OF THE ISSUE



Neighborhood
Centers Inc.

Lifting hearts.
Building futures.

100 YEARS 1907-2007



SHIFTING THE DEBATE TO WHERE IT BELONGS

As the nation has become more deeply involved in the debate over U.S. immigration policy, much of the discussion has focused on “amnesty.” This has led to a number of misconceptions about the concept itself: the idea that amnesty is un-American, or that a majority of Americans oppose it, or that deportation – regardless of its impact on children and families – is the only alternative.

Neighborhood Centers Inc. serves the newly arrived throughout Greater Houston, so our clients have a stake in the debate. Whatever immigration policy emerges has the potential to profoundly affect thousands of people who come to our city in search of the human dream of a better life for themselves and their families.

We are not policy-makers. But we do have a responsibility to be a voice for fairness, tolerance, and compassion. And we believe that no one – regardless of their race or national origin – should suffer the indignity of being criminalized because they had the courage to flee poverty, starvation, violence, or political repression.

Our hope is that by refocusing the dialogue, and putting amnesty in a more human – and more humane – context, we can help change the conversation and shift the debate back to where it belongs: On people, rather than politics.



RECLAIMING AN AMERICAN TRADITION

“The government of the United States,” George Washington wrote in 1790, “requires only that they who live under its protection should [carry] themselves as good citizens, in giving in on all occasions their effectual support.”

Have unauthorized immigrants met Washington’s standard of good citizenship? Yes, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. “Except for violating the immigration laws,” the *Journal* says, “immigrants eligible for amnesty have done that.” But in the current political climate, opponents continue to claim that “amnesty” is somehow sinister when, in fact, it is part of the American tradition.

Presidents from George Washington to Abraham Lincoln, Harry Truman to Jimmy Carter, and Gerald Ford to Ronald Reagan have granted pardons and amnesties, in Lincoln’s words, “to bind the nation’s wounds.” Amnesty has historically been a way to put aside past wrongs and grievances so that we as individuals – and as a society – can heal and move forward.

And while there is no doubt that we are a nation of laws, we also want laws that conform to moral dimensions that go beyond political expression to embrace liberty, justice, and tolerance. That’s what this country is about. So as Americans, we have a responsibility to reclaim the debate – and the concept of amnesty – in the name of true American values.



AMNESTY AND THE MYTH OF NATIONAL OPPOSITION

Anyone who listens to the heated immigration debate might assume a majority of Americans believe the only way to fix a broken system is by undertaking harsh, extreme, uncompromising policies. But public opinion surveys suggest that just the opposite is true.

A bipartisan survey by The Tarrance Group and Lake Research, for example, found that 75 percent of American voters favor immigration reform that includes allowing additional foreign workers into America to work for a temporary period; creating a system that allows unauthorized immigrants to come forward, register, pay a fine, and receive a temporary work permit; and providing these temporary workers with a path to earned citizenship if they meet certain requirements.

Other research has produced remarkably similar results:

- Repeated polling by three different research firms found that 65 percent of Republicans and 70 percent of Democrats support proposals that provide legal status with a path to citizenship for unpermitted workers who pay fines and back taxes, learn English, and pass citizenship classes.
- In a *USA Today*/Gallup poll, nearly four out of five Americans favored giving unauthorized immigrants a path to citizenship, and just 14 percent said they wanted to send these immigrants back to their country of origin with no chance to return.
- A Quinnipiac University poll found that 66 percent of Republicans and 72 percent of Democrats support allowing unauthorized immigrants into a guest worker program with a path to citizenship over a period of several years.
- *Time* magazine found that 78 percent of Americans support allowing unauthorized immigrants to legalize their status and seek citizenship under certain terms.
- And in the March 2007 Houston Area Survey by Stephen Klineberg of Rice University, nearly 70 percent of respondents supported granting unauthorized immigrants a path to legal citizenship if they meet certain requirements.

These findings reinforce the fact that we as a nation have faith in the core strength of America and our ability to keep doing what we've done for decades: Accept and accommodate anyone who comes here in pursuit of self-sufficiency, freedom, and hope.

And that, in the end, is what amnesty is all about.



UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES FOR CHILDREN?

In its extreme application, a no-amnesty policy would have the effect of deporting millions of unauthorized workers – an act that most experts believe is economically unsound and logistically impossible. But what is getting lost in the rhetoric is the potential harm to immigrant children.

According to the Pew Center, about 3 million American-born children have at least one parent who is an unauthorized immigrant, and one in 10 U.S. families has at least one member who is undocumented. Additionally, research from the Urban Institute indicates that about half of all working-age unauthorized adults have at least one child. But these become more than just statistics when the impact of family disruption on children is considered.

A November 2007 study by the Urban Institute for the National Council of La Raza analyzed the effect on children of workplace raids, which almost universally lead to the same deportation actions that would likely follow in the wake of a no-amnesty policy. The results, states the report, are “striking”:

- For every two immigrants apprehended, one child was left behind. “This suggests that potentially thousands of children have been separated from their parents...and millions more may be at risk.”
- 93 percent of all children of immigrants under six live in a mixed status family with one or more immigrant parent. As such, actions that separate parents from children affect “the most vulnerable members of society.”
- After being separated from their parents, children “experienced feelings of abandonment and showed symptoms of emotional trauma, psychological duress, and mental health problems.”

The report concludes: “One of society’s fundamental principles is that, to the extent possible, children should not be punished for the sins of their parents...This principle – and a core value of our democracy – is currently under assault.”



A FAIR, JUST, HUMANE APPROACH

Clearly, some form of amnesty is the principled, practical answer to the question of how to best fix a broken immigration system. It conforms to our traditions of compassion, generosity, and forgiveness. Moreover, when all the rhetoric is put aside, amnesty just makes sense: We cannot simply deport 12 million people overnight.

But whatever form immigration policy may take, it should be fair, just, and humane – like America, and like Americans. To that end, any proposal should include provisions that:

- Keep families together. We are a nation built on the foundation of the family and strong family values. That principle should be respected for all families, including those with foreign-born members.
- Remove the shadows. Forcing immigrant families to live in the shadows criminalizes those who enrich our nation. A fair amnesty policy would demand that everyone here for honorable reasons step forward and be counted.
- Create legal avenues for workers and their families to come here. The process must be clear and straightforward so that hardworking families can gain legal admission, and so that employers, especially small businesses, aren't confronted with a costly regulator burden.
- Provide a clear path to earned citizenship. Those who come to pursue the American Dream should be afforded a fair opportunity to become an American citizen. Our current system discourages even the best educated with substantial resources from achieving this goal.
- Protect our borders. We must prevent the migration of those who do not share our values, while at the same time preserving the rights, opportunities, and dignity of hard-working immigrants and their families.



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