

Civic Engagement Update

Congreso de Latinos Unidos

April 17, 2006

Immigration Reform - American Dream Act

Summary

House Introduces the "American Dream Act" (H.R. 5131) - On Thursday, April 6 Reps. Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-FL), Howard Berman (D-CA), and Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA) introduced the "American Dream Act," H.R. 5131. One of the original cosponsors is Melissa Hart (R-PA), who represented Western PA. This bill takes the place of the "Student Adjustment Act." This bill will affect immigrant youth in our community.

The bill was created to mirror the Senate "DREAM Act," S. 2075. Unlike the "Student Adjustment Act", this bill includes high school graduation or a GED as one of the requirements for immigration relief. As in the "DREAM Act," the "American Dream Act" would: encourage states to offer in-state tuition to undocumented students, create a path to citizenship, consider legal permanent resident status on a *conditional basis*, protect from deportation, and grant work authorization for students.

Congreso's Position

Congreso, along with NCLR, support the "DREAM Act", S1545 and did support the "Student Adjustment Act", HR 1684. The "American DREAM Act" has restrictions in it that were not included in the "Student Adjustment Act", like requiring high school graduation or a GED for immigration relief. The benefit of the "American DREAM Act" is that it so closely reflects the language of the DREAM Act. As such, the legislation is more likely to be passed.

Congreso's Action

To demonstrate support for the "American Dream Act":

- Congreso is collaborating with NCLR to advocate for the passing of the bill.
- Call Rep. Melissa Hart (R-PA) at 202.225.2565, and thank her for introducing and supporting the "American Dream Act".
- Call your Representative and ask him/her to cosponsor the "American Dream Act." The U.S. Capitol switchboard number is (202) 224-3121. The representative in our district (where the Congreso office is) is Robert Brady (D), and his number is (202) 225-4731.

Immigration Reform – S. 2454 & H. 4437

Summary

The U.S. Senate has not reached closure in considering The Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2006 (CIRA) S. 2454 because of a disagreement between the Republican and Democratic leadership on how to proceed on amendments to the compromise proposal. Congress is currently on a two week recess, scheduled to return to Washington on April 27. It is likely that they will immediately return to consideration of immigration reform, although what Senators hear during the next two weeks at home may determine the outcome.

The compromise proposal still requires improvements to the enforcement section of the bill. Moreover, there is legitimate concern that, even if the compromise proposal passes the Senate, it will be severely weakened in the conference committee with the House of Representatives, as the Senate bill and HR 4437 are reconciled.

Congreso's Position

Congreso opposes Anti-immigrant enforcement-only proposals like Sensenbrenner-King (HR 4437) and seeks more comprehensive reform. We support the Senate Judiciary Committee bill as it addresses Comprehensive Immigration Reform. Comprehensive Immigration reform needs to include:

- A means for the 12 million undocumented to earn legal status
- A legal way for new workers to work in the United States
- A removal of delays that keep family members apart for years
- Targeted and effective enforcement that respects humanness and liberty of expression

Congreso's Action

- We participated in the National Day of Action on Immigrants Rights on April 10, with approximately 25 staff and clients.
- Immediately call Senator Specter (202) 224-4254 and Santorum (215) 864-6900 in support of Senate Judiciary Committee Bill. Within the Senate Judiciary Committee Bill encourage the following three items to be addressed: Discourage local police enforcement, inclusion of due process, and exclusion of indefinite detention.
- **A "Day Without an Immigrant" is scheduled for May 1. Congreso has not taken a position on this day, but is included in conversations with a local taskforce that will be strategizing how to support those immigrants who will refuse work that day and want to show support for comprehensive immigration reform.

Minimum Wage Increase – HB 257

Summary

Increasing Pennsylvania's minimum wage to \$7.15 per hour. The House of Representatives approved the bill on April 5, which would increase the state's minimum wage to \$6.25 by July 1, 2006 and to \$7.15 by July 1, 2007. Governor Rendell and our State Senator Christine Tartaglione (who introduced minimum wage reform under SB 926) are in strong support of this measure. With House approval, increasing the minimum wage is now in the hands of the Senate. NY, NJ, DE, and MD and 15 other states have already passed minimum wage increases. The current minimum wage falls below the federal poverty level, and as such puts a strain on taxpayers through the social welfare system. (Two-thirds of workers earning the minimum wage are women.) 7% of working Pennsylvanians earn this wage.

Congreso's Position

We support the measure as it will assist many families (Latinos) and adults to spiral out of poverty. Without an increase low wage earners cannot invest in education, healthcare, homeownership, or retirement.

Congreso's Action: Call Swing Senators (Republican support is especially needed as, reportedly, all of the Democratic Senators support this measure). Go to www.legis.state.pa.us and type in zip code to find your senator. When you call ask your Senator to refuse a pay increase until the minimum wage increase is passed.

Adult Education

Summary

The Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) is decreasing the availability and increasing the costs of Adult Literacy classes (Adult Basic Education - ABE, GED, and ESL) offered to Latinos in Philadelphia. With a \$57million budget from public monies, less than 1% of that is dedicated to these courses. There is about a 60% reduction in the courses offered.

Congreso's Position

We would like to challenge CCP to increase the contribution to ABE, GED and ESL classes to at least 5% of the citywide budget. Less than 50% of Latinos in Philadelphia have a high school diploma or its equivalent and 50% are unemployed. Without this educational opportunity, Latinos are even more limited in advancing in their education; hence, limiting their employment opportunities.

Congreso's Action

Congreso's President, Nick Torres, testified to City Council on March 29, 2006, imploring for an increase in citywide funding and an increase in the allocation designated for adult literacy classes. Congreso will state its case to CCP as well. Congreso will be working with the larger Latino and other immigration population to encourage the demand for the same.

Federal Budget: TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families)

Summary

The US House is trying to pass a budget that will cut \$10.3 Billion from domestic discretionary programs such as education, child care, housing, and other social and community programs. The proposed funding for TANF, which is reauthorized until 2010, will potentially call for a new work participation requirement that will greatly increase the need for child care. Adequate child care funding was not included in the proposed budget.

Congreso's Position

Congreso opposes these sweeping social service reductions to the budget.

Congreso's Action

Congreso signed on to a supportive letter with PA Welfare Coalition and Philadelphia Citizen's for Children and Youth (PCCY).

State Budget

Summary

The 2006/2007 Pennsylvania budget is currently in development. The House has already proposed to cut \$25M in funding for the Philadelphia School District.

Congreso's Position

Congreso opposes any cuts to public education funding in the city, especially since there has been a marked improvement in our education system since reform legislation was passed in 2001. (Philadelphia has achieved the greatest point gain in test score improvement over other large urban school systems.)

Congreso's Action

Support Representative Dwight Evans, as he fights this cut, by calling House Representatives and Senators to advocate for education funding. Go to www.legis.state.pa.us and type in your zip code to find your representative and senator.

Voter Registration & Election Monitoring

Summary

We have a big election year in Pennsylvania. We have one senator seat and our Governor seat up for election. Senator Santorum (R) will run against the Democratic candidate who will be determined in the primary. The leading Democratic candidates are Bob Casey, Alan Sanders and Chuck Pennacchio. (They will have a final, local debate April 19th in Lancaster.) The Governor's election (potentially among leading candidates - but determined during the May 16 primary - Rendell (D), Swann (R) & Diamond (I)) is the other big race for this year.

Congreso's Position

Congreso encourages all citizens who are over 18 years of age to register to vote. Haga su voz – it's your right! If you didn't register in time to vote for the primary elections on May 16, 2006, you still have time to register for the November elections.

Congreso's Actions

- Congreso is seeking folks to be trained as Election Monitors for the May Primary. We are involved, as we support hassle-free, voter confident elections. We have nine people signed-up for this civic engagement effort as of April 17. WE NEED MORE, and this is our final recruitment effort.
- Congreso is involved with National Council of La Raza's LEAP 2006. Congreso has set a goal of surpassing its 2004 goal of registering 500 majority-Latino voters in Philadelphia and surrounding counties. You will be hearing soon how you can become involved in this important effort, as we develop outreach and registration efforts internally and throughout our communities.

Workforce Investment Act (WIA)

Summary

Under WIA the federal government, states and local communities join efforts to develop a system providing workers with job search assistance, training, and advice. All entities will work together to provide employers with skilled workers. The Act is awaiting reauthorization through the various budget allocations. MORE TO COME.

Domestic Violence – Victims of Crime Act

Summary

Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding levels have decreased 5-7% every year since President Bush took office. The situation is about to get worse as the Senate and House vote to rescind the leftover VOCA money at the end of the year, which provides the money for the next year. This cut is intended for general government spending. National Crime Victims' Rights Week is April 23 - 29, 2006. See www.ncvc.org/policy for more information. In the Senate, Senators Mike Crapo (R-ID) and Patrick Leahy (D-VT), along with 22 other Senators, sent a letter to the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, and Science, urging them to protect the VOCA Fund. In the House, a letter to the appropriators is still being circulated for signatures by the House Victims' Rights Caucus and Congressional Women's Caucus.

Congreso's Position

Funding for those who are victims of crimes need to be protected.

Congreso's Action

- As of April 18, 2006, our Senators in Pennsylvania, Santorum & Specter, have not signed this letter. We can encourage them to print the letter, add their signature to the bottom, and submit it to the Subcommittee.
- Contact your Representative, urging him or her to sign on to protect the VOCA Fund. The deadline for signatures is April 27. If you're not sure who represents you or need the office phone number, you can call the House's Capitol switchboard at (202) 225-3121 or check on-line at www.house.gov.