

The right way to mend immigration

By Charles E. Schumer and Lindsey O. Graham

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Our immigration system is badly broken. Although our borders have become far more secure in recent years, too many people seeking illegal entry get through. We have no way to track whether the millions who enter the United States on valid visas each year leave when they are supposed to. And employers are burdened by a complicated system for verifying workers' immigration status.

Last week we met with President Obama to discuss our draft framework for action on immigration. We expressed our belief that America's security and economic well-being depend on enacting sensible immigration policies.

The answer is simple: Americans overwhelmingly [oppose illegal immigration](#) and [support legal immigration](#). Throughout our history, immigrants have contributed to making this country more vibrant and economically dynamic. Once it is clear that in 20 years our nation will not again confront the specter of another 11 million people coming here illegally, Americans will embrace more welcoming immigration policies.

Our plan has four pillars: requiring biometric Social Security cards to ensure that illegal workers cannot get jobs; fulfilling and strengthening our commitments on border security and interior enforcement; creating a process for admitting temporary workers; and implementing a tough but fair path to legalization for those already here.

Besides border security, ending illegal immigration will also require an effective employment verification system that holds employers accountable for hiring illegal workers. A tamper-proof ID system would dramatically decrease illegal immigration, experts have said, and would reduce the government revenue lost when employers and workers here illegally fail to pay taxes.

We would require all U.S. citizens and legal immigrants who want jobs to obtain a high-tech, fraud-proof Social Security card. Each card's unique biometric identifier would be stored only on the card; no government database would house everyone's information. The cards would not contain any private information, medical information, nor tracking devices. The card will be a high-tech version of the Social Security card that citizens already have.

Prospective employers would be responsible for swiping the cards through a machine to confirm a person's identity and immigration status. Employers who refused to swipe the card or who otherwise knowingly hired unauthorized workers would face stiff fines and, for repeat offenses, prison sentences.

We propose a zero-tolerance policy for gang members, smugglers, terrorists and those who commit other felonies after coming here illegally. We would bolster recent efforts to secure our borders by increasing the Border Patrol's staffing and funding for infrastructure and technology. More personnel would be deployed to the border immediately to fill gaps in apprehension capabilities.

Other steps include expanding domestic enforcement to better apprehend and deport those who commit crimes and completing an entry-exit system that tracks people who enter the United States on legal visas and reports those who overstay their visas to law enforcement databases.

Ending illegal immigration, however, cannot be the sole objective of reform. Developing a rational legal immigration system is essential to ensuring America's future economic prosperity.

Ensuring economic prosperity requires attracting the world's best and brightest. Our legislation would award green cards to immigrants who receive a PhD or master's degree in science, technology, engineering or math from a U.S. university. It makes no sense to educate the world's future inventors and entrepreneurs and then force them to leave when they are able to contribute to our economy.

Our blueprint also creates a rational system for admitting lower-skilled workers. Our current system prohibits lower-skilled immigrants from coming here to earn money and then returning home. Our framework would facilitate this desired circular migration by allowing employers to hire immigrants if they can show they were unsuccessful in recruiting an American to fill an open position; allowing more lower-skilled immigrants to come here when our economy is creating jobs and fewer in a recession; and permitting workers who have succeeded in the workplace, and contributed to their communities over many years, the chance to earn a green card.

For the 11 million immigrants already in this country illegally, we would provide a tough but fair path forward. They would be required to admit they broke the law and to pay their debt to society by performing community service and paying fines and back taxes. These people would be required to pass background checks and be proficient in English before going to the back of the line of prospective immigrants to earn the opportunity to work toward lawful permanent residence.

The American people deserve more than empty rhetoric and impractical calls for mass deportation. We urge the public and our colleagues to join our bipartisan efforts in enacting these reforms.

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