

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

October 06, 2022

Alejandro Mayorkas
Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
3007th St. SW
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Secretary Mayorkas:

As border communities continue to do everything possible to collaborate with the federal government to address migrants arriving at the southern border, it is important that both Congress and the Administration address the challenges and opportunities with which we are being presented. Until Congress takes action on comprehensive immigration reform, our best course of action is a multi-pronged approach that can help us address pressing economic needs and better manage the border – which has overwhelmed agents for far too long, stressed communities, and presented indignities to vulnerable migrants for decades.

The United States' decades-old immigration laws prevent us from addressing modern immigration challenges with necessary timeliness or respond to these challenges in proactive ways. Even as the need for commonsense legislative immigration reform becomes more and more pressing, Congress continues to struggle to get reforms off the ground. As such, we have had to rely on relative flexibility of executive agencies to respond to several immigration challenges through limited processing programs, issued rules, and departmental policy updates.

With that said, we write today to urge the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to work alongside the Department of State (DOS) to create new legal immigration pathways through in-country processing, to reimagine the way we receive asylum seekers at our borders, and to give asylum seekers who have already filed claims the tools to support themselves and their families.

In March of this year, Congresswoman Veronica Escobar led a letter to Secretary of State Anthony Blinken asking that DOS urgently consider establishing in-country processing programs for people in certain Central American countries. The letter was signed by 21 other Members of Congress and stated that, in conjunction with the restoration of full and fair asylum at the border, in-country programs will give people the opportunity to apply for humanitarian relief without having to risk their lives and the lives of their families, while helping ease migration through Central America and Mexico into the United States.

In addition the work that can be done at the executive agency level, legislators in Congress have put forth several measures to respond to current immigration needs. But in the absence of comprehensive reforms, more tailored legislative measures have emerged as effective ways to incrementally address some immigration challenges.

Last year, Congresswoman Veronica Escobar introduced [H.R.5618](#), the *Reimagining Asylum Processing Act*, which would establish Humanitarian Processing Centers for asylum seekers and implement several measures to ensure that anyone seeking asylum is treated humanely upon arriving in the U.S. The bill prioritizes connecting asylum seekers with community-based case management services in their intended destinations and would also designate civilian employees at U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to take over administrative processing duties for federal law enforcement agents who have been taken off the line of duty to perform administrative work. This will ensure that our highly trained federal law enforcement officers can focus exclusively on the job they were trained to do – securing our border.

This would complement Representative Escobar's work in the 116th Congress to create Processing Center Coordinators, a federal civilian workforce inside processing centers who have provided important support to Border Patrol Agents. Local communities on the border should not be shouldering what is ultimately a federal responsibility, and overwhelmed agents should not be responsible for providing the kind of humanitarian support that is better provided by trained civilians. Representative Escobar's bill addresses both of those challenges. Throughout this Congress, Representative Escobar has also called the Department of Homeland Security to civilianize the CPC workforce and has asked the Secretary to consider using the provisions in H.R. 5618 as the basis for a pilot program at the soon-to-be-built CBP processing facility in El Paso.

Similarly, we must focus on the ways in which we can empower asylum seekers to be self-sufficient, provide for their families, and build relationships in their new communities. Congresswoman Chellie Pingree's bill, [H.R. 6693](#), *Asylum Seeker Work Authorization Act*, gives asylum seekers shortens the waiting period for receiving employment authorization to 30 days after filing an asylum application and would direct DHS to grant eligible asylum seekers two-year employment authorization, with options to renew. Adjusting the time period for filing for work eligibility is not new to DHS: issuing a rule to allow asylum seekers to apply for work authorization concurrently with their underlying asylum application and shorten the wait time for eligibility to just 30 days would allow applicants with credible claims, who are already on their way to establishing themselves in the U.S., to more quickly be able to provide for themselves and their families, which in turn builds community and helps address employee shortages across several key U.S. industries.

The United States currently faces labor shortages across many industries and on the heels of the misleading national spotlight being cast once again by extremists on immigrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border. As you know, immigrants play a vital role in the U.S. economy: our agriculture, restaurant, and hospitality sectors, for example, rely heavily on immigrant labor, as do high-skilled industries such as engineering and tech. They annually contribute billions of dollars in state and local taxes, as well as fill employment gaps left by American-born workers who leave the workforce to retire or go back to school.

While all industries were rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic, only some have been able to fully recover and attract workers. Nationally, the U.S. is experiencing a [6.1%](#) unemployment rate across the already-precarious Accommodation and Food Preparation industries; according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Food Services and Drinking Places subsector recently experienced a [rise](#) in unemployment, going from 5.1% in July 2022 to 6.3% in August 2022. Amidst [unfilled job openings](#) across the country, with workers changing fields due to burnout or new opportunities and small businesses struggling to keep their doors open, using the rulemaking process to authorize eligible asylum seekers to seek work faster is an innovative way to address our worker shortage, our inflation challenges, and one part of the humanitarian solution to the current plight of asylum seekers in the U.S. For years now, business leaders have [called](#) for commonsense, bipartisan immigration reforms to help incorporate hardworking immigrants into the [economy](#).

To tackle immigration effectively, we need a whole-of-government approach that better manages the border through in-country processing; allows border patrol agents to focus on their mission at the border, offers relief for border communities, and allows those legally seeking asylum to help us deal with our labor shortage by allowing them to work sooner than 6 months. Our border communities are working tirelessly to provide migrants with assistance as they begin the asylum process, but there are ways in which the federal government can and must step up to further empower asylum seekers as they work toward a better life for themselves and their families.

Thank you for your consideration, and we look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely,



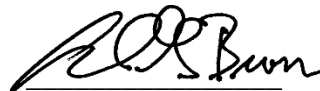
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