



**FIRST FOCUS CAMPAIGN FOR CHILDREN
STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION POLICY AND BORDER SECURITY:
“ADDRESSING THE IMMIGRATION STATUS OF ILLEGAL
IMMIGRANTS BROUGHT TO THE U.S. AS CHILDREN”**

July 23, 2013

Chairman Gowdy, Ranking Member Lofgren, and Members of the Subcommittee on Immigration Policy and Border Security, thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement on addressing the immigration status of immigrants brought to the U.S. as children.

The First Focus Campaign for Children is a bipartisan children’s advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions. An important aspect of that work is a commitment to ensuring that our nation’s immigration policies promote child well-being by ensuring that families stay together and that all children have the opportunity to grow and thrive. We support the passage of immigration reform that meets the needs of children and protects American family values.

We have long worked towards passage of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, and are encouraged to see support continue to grow on the issue across party lines. We firmly believe that immigrants who entered the U.S. as children, have grown up as Americans, and call this country their home should have the opportunity to become U.S. citizens and fully contribute to society. It is estimated that 1 million children currently under the age of 18 are growing up in the U.S. facing an uncertain future, with the only option of relief being the temporary two-year deferred action and work authorization available through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.¹ While the DACA program has been successful in providing short-term relief to thousands, congressional action is still urgently needed to provide these young people with a long-term solution only achievable through a path to citizenship. Providing undocumented youth with citizenship would help secure our nation’s future prosperity by reducing the high school dropout rate and making the U.S. once again a global leader in college completion rates. In fact, a 2010 study by the UCLA North American Integration and Development Center found that the legalization of undocumented youth could potentially generate 1.38 to 3.6 trillion dollars over their lifetime.² Therefore, we firmly believe that any legislative fix for immigrants brought to the U.S. as children must be as inclusive as possible by accounting for all immigrants who entered as minors despite their current age, creating achievable requirements and fees, and making higher education affordable.

However, we also firmly believe that a legislative fix that only addresses the children in need of immigration status falls short of fully addressing the challenges facing the millions of children that are impacted by U.S. immigration policy every day, including the 4.5 million U.S. citizen children living in mixed-legal status families. These children live in fear of being separated from a parent or loved one at any moment, and thousands have already been torn apart from a father or mother. In fact, according to the Department of Homeland Security, nearly 205,000 parents of U.S. citizen children were deported in the 26 months between July 1, 2010 and September 31, 2012.³ Research has consistently shown that separation from a parent due to immigration enforcement has a significant detrimental impact on children's mental and physical health, academic performance, and economic stability.⁴ A new report by Human Impact Partners estimates that in the next year, if current immigration enforcement levels are maintained, roughly 43,000 U.S. citizen children will experience a decline in health as a result of the deportation of a primary caregiver, while another 100,000 children will suffer from withdrawal after a parent's arrest.⁵ In some cases, a child with a detained or deported parent may unnecessarily enter the U.S. child welfare system, as documented by a recent report by the Applied Research Center which estimates that 5,100 children with a detained or deported parent are currently living in foster care. Once a child is involved with the child welfare system, there is a significant risk that they may be permanently separated from their family due to conflicting immigration and child welfare laws.

For too long our immigration laws have failed to consider the interests of children, and as result, our children have paid a heavy price. Addressing the 1 million children in need of legal status is an important first step, but it is also necessary that Congress act to pass a comprehensive fix to our immigration system that protects our children's rights and interests and keeps families together. Recognizing the need for immigration reform to duly consider the needs of children, First Focus co-led an effort to develop a set of [children's principles for immigration reform](#) which have been endorsed by over 200 organizations. These principles call for immigration reform to:

- Provide children, youth and their families with a direct, clear, and reasonable pathway to citizenship, including a unique and expedited path for all those who entered the U.S. as children, such as DACA-grantees, undocumented children who are still minors, immigrant foster children, and unaccompanied immigrant children;
- Ensure that immigration judges are allowed to exercise discretion in admission and removal decisions based on the hardship to U.S. citizen and lawfully permanent children;
- Ensure that parents are not needlessly separated from their children, by reforming immigration enforcement policies to ensure that the best interest of children are considered in detention, transfer, and removal decisions and allowing parents to make decisions regarding their child's care;
- Establish policies for child welfare and immigration enforcement agencies to better facilitate the reunification of children in foster care with a detained or deported parent;
- Modernize the family immigration system to address the backlog and create appropriate channels for future migration that promote family unity;
- Protect access to critical safety net programs and income supports for children and their families; and
- Provide improved protections for unaccompanied immigrant children, including access to legal representation.

In closing, we'd like to thank the Chairman and the Subcommittee for holding this hearing on such an important issue and for recognizing that children must be given special consideration in the immigration debate. We fully support inclusive and reasonable legislation that will provide undocumented individuals who entered the U.S. as children with the opportunity to achieve full citizenship as part of a larger immigration proposal that addresses the needs of the millions of children living in mixed legal-status families as well as the thousands of vulnerable unaccompanied immigrant children seeking refuge in our country every year. To fully make children a priority, Congress must address the full spectrum of issues impacting children to ensure that our immigration system works for children and families.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit this statement. Should you have any further questions, please contact Wendy Cervantes, Vice President of Immigration and Child Rights Policy at wendyc@firstfocus.net.

¹ Immigration Policy Center (2012). *Who and Where the DREAMers are*. <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/who-and-where-dreamers-are>.

² Ojeda, Raul H. et. al. (2010). *No DREAMers Left Behind: The Economic Potential of DREAM Act Beneficiaries*. North American Integration and Development Center, University of California, Los Angeles. http://naid.ucla.edu/uploads/4/2/1/9/4219226/no_dreamers_left_behind.pdf

³ U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Deportation of Parents of U.S. Citizen Children July 1, 2010- September 30, 2012. Accessed by Colorlines.com on December 12, 2012. http://colorlines.com/archives/2012/12/deportations_of_parents_of_us-born_citizens_122012.html

⁴ Ajay Chaundry et. al., The Urban Institute (2010). *Facing our Future: Children in the aftermath of immigration enforcement*. http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412020_FacingOurFuture_final.pdf.

⁵ Human Impact Partners. June 2013. *Family Unity, Family Health: How Family-Focused Immigration Reform Will Mean Better Health for Children and Families*. Oakland, CA. Available: <http://www.humanimpact.org/component/jdownloads/finish/7/304>.