



## Department of Migration and Refugee Services Policy Office

### Integrating Our Undocumented Neighbors January 2022

*“The Holy Spirit enables us to embrace everyone, to build communion in diversity, to unify differences without imposing a depersonalized uniformity. In encountering the diversity of foreigners, migrants and refugees, and in the intercultural dialogue that can emerge from this encounter, we have an opportunity to grow as Church and to enrich one another.”*

– Pope Francis, Message for the 107th World Day of Migrants and Refugees (2021)

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#### **BACKGROUND:**

There are over 10 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States who lack the ability to acquire legal status. Many of those without legal status or access to permanent residency have lived in this country for years, if not decades, and have established strong community ties. In fact, the percentage of undocumented immigrants that has lived in the United States for 15 years or more increased from 25% to 43% between 2010 and 2019. Many of those have U.S.-citizen children and spouses, own homes, and manage businesses. They serve as leaders in their faith communities, schools, and other institutions. They also contribute significantly to the American economy. Five million undocumented immigrants—nearly three out of four of those in the workforce—are classified as essential workers. Undocumented immigrants are estimated to have contributed over \$20 billion in federal taxes in 2018, along with almost \$12 billion in state and local taxes. They also pay at least \$7 billion annually in Social Security taxes, though they are barred from receiving Social Security benefits. However, undocumented immigrants are frequently exposed to mistreatment and exploitation because they lack legal status, not to mention the constant threat of deportation. Attempting to deport millions of people to their countries of origin would be unworkable and only serve to fragment families and harm local communities.

When it comes to immigration reform and undocumented immigrants specifically, a federal legislative solution is critical. For many years, Congress has failed to make meaningful changes to the U.S. immigration system. This has resulted in immigration policies largely being decided by the executive branch, leading to inconsistent approaches from one administration to the next. This trend is untenable. For example, recent attempts to terminate the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and judicial intervention have made it impossible for new applicants to receive relief through DACA, while also throwing into question whether those already enrolled in the program will continue to receive protection. This threatens the futures of hundreds of thousands of Dreamers, many of whom have thrived as a result of DACA, and only Congress can provide a sustainable solution.

#### **USCCB POSITION:**

Regardless of their legal status, undocumented immigrants, like all persons created in God’s image, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected. Therefore, government policies that respect the

basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary. The U.S. bishops put this another way in 1986, following passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), stating: “It is against the common good and unacceptable to have a double society, one visible with rights and one invisible without rights—a voiceless underground of undocumented persons.” However, undocumented immigrants are often relegated to the margins of our society, unable to integrate and participate fully in American life, regardless of their contributions. This is especially true when so many without legal status have committed themselves to the wellbeing of others and have simultaneously been excluded from programs and denied rights afforded to citizens, as we’ve seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Church also views this issue in relation to families. Catholic social teaching holds that families—and their wellbeing—directly impact the future of society, which itself is comprised of families. Providing full legal status to the undocumented would give certainty and stability to immigrant and mixed-status families, while also allowing those who have been separated to reunify.

Throughout his pontificate, Pope Francis has spoken extensively on the issue of migration and the Catholic Church’s commitment to an “ever wider ‘we’”. In his most recent encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, the Holy Father highlights “the plea of the stranger” and the scriptural call “to recognize Christ himself in each of our abandoned or excluded brothers and sisters.” He goes on to speak about the mutually beneficial nature of immigration, recalling a statement he made some years ago: “Immigrants, if they are helped to integrate, are a blessing, a source of enrichment and new gift that encourages a society to grow.”

For these reasons, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has long supported immigration reform that includes legalization with a pathway to citizenship. Though a more comprehensive reform of the U.S. immigration system is needed, integrating our undocumented neighbors is a crucial step toward justice at the margins.

### **ACTION REQUESTED:**

As a necessary element of immigration reform, urge Congress to pass legislation granting legalization with a pathway to citizenship to undocumented immigrants and other long-time residents, especially Dreamers, Temporary Protected Status (TPS)/Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) holders, undocumented agricultural workers, and other undocumented essential workers.

### **RESOURCES:**

- Backgrounder: [Immigration Reform](#)
- Report: [Immigration Reform and the Church’s Voice](#)
- Statement: [U.S. Bishops’ Migration Chairman Addresses Future of Immigration Reform](#)
- Congressional Testimony: [The U.S. Immigration System: The Need for Bold Reforms](#)

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