

## **Commentary: State should do more for immigrants**

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A year from now, New York will hold elections for its entire state government — for governor, and for Assembly and Senate. Gov. Andrew Cuomo has already announced his intention to seek a third term in office. Many expect Cuomo's reelection bid to be a dress rehearsal for the 2020 presidential election, and he will likely be a formidable candidate given the state's strong economic record. At the same time, Cuomo's relatively weak record on immigration means he will face considerable challenges energizing voters in 2018, let alone in 2020.

Governors like Jerry Brown of California, Dannel Malloy of Connecticut, and Jay Inslee of Washington have enacted bold, broad policies that protect immigrants from harmful actions by the Trump administration. These bold actions should serve as a competitive nudge to New York, which has a proud tradition of being a state that is welcoming of immigrants. Lady Liberty, Ellis Island, the Erie Canal — these are all iconic reminders of how immigrants help build our nation. In the past two decades, however, New York has slipped considerably behind peers like California, Illinois, and Washington when it comes to policies that protect immigrants and advance the state's economic interests. If Cuomo is to be seen as a national leader, he must step up and champion policies that protect immigrants and their contributions to the state's economy and American society.

Even today, Cuomo and the state Legislature have an opportunity to prove themselves as defenders of immigrants and the state's economic interests. The Trump administration's cancellation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program two months ago will mean the loss of up to **50,000 jobs** in New York. Thousands of DACA recipients also face the loss of state health insurance, driver's licenses, and state financial aid for colleges and universities. These disruptions will not only harm New York's immigrants, but will also cost the state **\$5 billion** a year, which is a conservative estimate from the libertarian **Cato Institute**. Yet the governor has not acted to secure benefits for those who are losing their DACA status. Even worse, the governor's signature Excelsior scholarship program — which makes the state's universities tuition free for families earning less than \$100,000 a year — continues to exclude New York's own Dreamers — an inexcusable omission.

But New York should not simply focus on DACA or Excelsior right now. As the recently launched "Blueprint for Immigrant New York" indicates, the state can — and should — do much more in the short term and long term to unlock the potential of its four million immigrants. New York can expand driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants, a vital step that will help rural economies and make suburban roads safer. It can also ensure that immigrant children can access healthcare benefits and guarantee that the state's English Language Learner students have the resources they need to better serve their communities and propel the state's economic future.

These immigrant-friendly policies proposed by the **New York Immigrant Coalition** would bolster the state's economy, which is especially significant in the context of a federal administration committed to cutting state funds for a variety of social services. For example, the Fiscal Policy Institute **estimates** that driver's license legislation alone would result in \$57 million in annual government revenues, plus \$26 million in one-time revenues.

The governor has taken some steps forward, including funding the Liberty Defense Project, which helps immigrants obtain legal services regardless of their status, to the tune of \$10 million and issuing an executive order around confidentiality for State Police. Yet the fact remains that states like California, Washington, Connecticut, and Illinois have already surpassed New York with their ambitious policy agendas.

As the state and local elections showed last week, there is considerable hunger among voters for bold policies that promote inclusion, not exclusion. One year after the election of Donald Trump, Cuomo and those in the state Legislature must show real leadership if New York is to reclaim its historical reputation as the nation's preeminent home for immigrants.