

# POLITICO

## Pathway shouldn't exclude safety net

By: Sen. Mazie Hirono - June 20, 2013

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Imagine that you buy homeowner's insurance, but the policy won't cover your house if it catches fire until 13 years after you start paying premiums. That would obviously not be fair. But that is exactly the situation in which people on the pathway to citizenship will find themselves because of restrictions in the Senate immigration bill, S.744.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates the bill will raise \$451 billion of new revenue over 2014-2023 and another \$1.5 trillion in the decade after that, mostly from income and payroll taxes paid by immigrants. Immigrants on the pathway to citizenship contribute to the funding of all federal programs with their tax dollars, but nearly all of them will be barred from using federal safety net programs for at least 13 years.

CBO's score emphasizes what other studies have shown: immigrants pay billions of dollars in taxes. Researchers at Harvard and the City University of New York found that immigrants, both legal and undocumented, contributed \$115.2 billion more to Medicare than they took out between 2002 and 2009. The Social Security Administration estimates undocumented immigrants contributed \$120-240 billion to the Social Security trust fund.

The strict requirements in the bill make clear that undocumented immigrants have to keep paying taxes to get on and stay on the pathway to citizenship. Immigrants must continue working and paying taxes, pay \$2000 of fines each, and meet other requirements to earn permanent legal status. Grover Norquist testified to the Senate Judiciary Committee that once immigrants earn legal status they will pay even more in taxes than they do now.

No one disputes it should be this way. Immigrants on the pathway must continue to pay taxes just like everyone else. The strict tax requirements in the Senate bill are the right policy.

What are wrong are the policies in the bill that prohibit most immigrant taxpayers from being able to use federal safety net programs for at least 13 years, the minimum length of time on the pathway. Their taxes pay for these programs but they can't use them. That is profoundly unfair.

The 13-year-long pathway to citizenship will be hard enough without these restrictions. Work hard to save up money not just for your kids' school supplies, but to pay the penalties in the bill. Lose your job and you risk losing your legal status and being deported.

The restrictions in the bill make the pathway even more treacherous. Pay your taxes, but don't get sick. Pay your taxes, but don't come to us for help.

These restrictions are not only unfair, they are bad economics. We should all want immigrants to be successful, start businesses and continue contributing to the economy. However, few people would use their life savings to start a business if they think their children will go hungry or go without healthcare if the business fails. The safety net programs exist so people can take risks to improve their economic circumstances.

It's worth remembering that immigrants come to this country to work, they don't come to get handouts. Research by the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute shows immigrants are more likely to be working or looking for work than natural born citizens, and immigrants are less likely to use federal safety net programs. The title of one Cato article sums it up nicely: "Evidence Shows Immigrants Come to Work, Not to Collect Welfare."

When we in Congress set the terms under which immigrants in this country must live, we wield a power that is checked primarily by our individual sense of fairness: the power to set taxes and make laws that apply to people who do not have representation.

Both political parties should be able to support the idea that taxpayers who are lawfully present, working, and paying taxes should be able to use the programs their tax dollars pay for — it is only fair. I introduced an amendment that says precisely that.

I want to be clear: my amendment applies only to immigrants who will be lawfully present. Undocumented immigrants are not eligible for these programs at all, and I am not proposing to change that.

But the pathway provides a route for certain people to earn lawful status, and eventually earn citizenship. Let's treat these taxpayers fairly. Like other immigrants, they had the courage and aspiration to leave their hometowns to look for work elsewhere, to give their kids better lives than they could dream for themselves. They are not much different from many of our ancestors. The undocumented should pay penalties for the laws they broke by coming here, but we should remember that the founding fathers were willing to break up an empire to achieve their dreams.

*Sen. Mazie Hirono (D-Hawaii)*