

Durbin Speaks With American Business Immigration Coalition About Need For Reform

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WASHINGTON – U.S. Senate Democratic Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL), Ranking Member of the Senate Judiciary Immigration Subcommittee, today spoke at the American Business Immigration Coalition’s Summit, entitled “Reigniting the Economic Engine: Immigration Solutions 2021,” about the possibility of comprehensive immigration reform under a Democratic-controlled Senate. Durbin was a member of the “Gang of 8” – four Republicans and four Democrats – that authored comprehensive immigration legislation that passed the Senate in 2013.

“If Democrats take the majority in the Senate, we would have the opportunity to reestablish the moral authority, credibility, and relevance of the Judiciary Committee. We would partner with the Biden-Harris Administration, and reach across the aisle to Republicans who are willing to work with us in good faith to repair the damage of the

last four years,” Durbin said. “With Democrats in the majority, we could again advance comprehensive immigration reform legislation. My Democratic colleagues and I are ready to roll up our sleeves and get to work if we are entrusted with the majority.”

Durbin’s remarks as prepared for delivery are below:

I want to thank my friend Zaher Sahloul for that generous introduction. Dr. Sahloul has done extraordinary humanitarian work providing medical care in Syria and other war-torn regions. I want to congratulate Dr. Sahloul for recently receiving the 2020 Gandhi Peace Award, a well-deserved recognition of his work.

Thank you to the American Business Immigration Coalition for the invitation to join you today. And thank you for your important work to highlight the economic contributions of immigrants and to advocate for bipartisan immigration reform.

I want to especially acknowledge ABIC’s extraordinary and energetic Executive Director, Becca Shi.

One month from now, the voters of Georgia will determine whether the United States Senate remains in Republican control, or whether Democrats will take the majority. Make no mistake, the future of immigration reform is on the ballot in Georgia.

To understand what is at stake, look no further than the Senate Judiciary Committee, where I have proudly served for 22 years.

We are now in the final days of four years under the most anti-immigrant President in modern history.

And for the last four years, Republicans leading the Senate Judiciary Committee have turned a blind eye to the worst abuses of the Trump era.

Separating thousands of children from their parents at the border. Banning Muslim immigrants. Ending deportation protections for Dreamers who know no home other than America. Dropping refugee numbers to record lows in the midst of the worst refugee crisis in history.

The Judiciary Committee traditionally holds annual oversight hearings to examine the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security. But for the last two years, Republicans have not held a single oversight hearing.

I'm proud to serve as the top Democrat – the Ranking Member – on the Immigration Subcommittee. But with Republicans in charge, the Immigration Subcommittee has held a grand total of one hearing during the last two years.

I would have liked to ask this Administration some questions about immigration. For example, what are they doing to reunite more than 600 children with their parents who still cannot be found? But we didn't have that chance.

Now I'd like to talk about an issue that is personal to me. It was 20 years ago that I introduced the Dream Act, bipartisan legislation to give a path to citizenship to Dreamers, young immigrants who grew up in this country.

The Dream Act passed the House in 2010, when Democrats had the majority, but it was filibustered in the Senate by Republicans.

When Democrats had the majority in the Senate, we passed bipartisan comprehensive immigration reform legislation – including the Dream Act. But by then Republicans controlled the House and they refused to even debate our bill.

It was ten years ago that I joined with Republican Senator Dick Lugar on a bipartisan basis to call on the President to use his legal authority to protect Dreamers from deportation.

President Obama responded by creating the DACA program. DACA provides temporary protection from deportation to Dreamers if they register with the government, pay a fee, and pass criminal and national security background checks.

More than 800,000 Dreamers came forward and received DACA. DACA unleashed the full potential of Dreamers, who are contributing to our country as soldiers, teachers, and small business owners.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 200,000 DACA recipients are “essential critical infrastructure workers.” That's not my term. It's the definition of President Trump's Department of Homeland Security.

Among these essential workers are 41,700 health care workers.

On September 5, 2017, President Trump repealed DACA. Hundreds of thousands of Dreamers faced losing their work permits and being deported to countries they barely remember.

Federal courts stepped in and ordered the Trump Administration to continue DACA for Dreamers who already had received this protection.

However, Dreamers who had not already received DACA have been blocked for applying for this protection for more than three years. The Center for American Progress estimates that approximately 300,000 Dreamers have been unable to apply for the program in that time.

On June 18, the Supreme Court rejected President Trump's repeal of DACA.

In an opinion by Chief Justice John Roberts, the Court held that the President's effort was, quote, "arbitrary and capricious."

On June 19, the day after the Supreme Court ruling, I led a letter from 43 Democratic Senators to President Trump.

We called on the President to immediately comply with the Supreme Court's decision and reopen DACA to all eligible individuals.

Nearly six months later, we still have not received a response to our letter. And the Trump Administration still refuses to reopen DACA to 300,000 Dreamers who have not had a chance to apply for this protection.

Acting Department of Homeland Security head Chad Wolf issued a memo saying DHS will reject new DACA applications. But a federal judge has held that Mr. Wolf is illegally serving as Acting Secretary so his memo is invalid.

There is something the Senate could do about this today. On June 4, 2019, the House of Representatives passed the Dream and Promise Act on a strong bipartisan vote. This legislation, which is based on the Dream Act, would give a path to citizenship to Dreamers.

The Dream and Promise Act also would provide a path to citizenship to 400,000 immigrants who have been living in the United States under Temporary Protected Status, also known as TPS.

More than 90 percent are originally from El Salvador, Honduras, and Haiti. Most have lived in the United States for more than two decades.

As with DACA, TPS recipients must register with the government, pay a fee, and clear criminal and national-security background checks.

Like DACA recipients, TPS recipients are making important contributions to our nation during the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 130,000 TPS holders are “essential critical infrastructure workers,” including 11,600 health care workers.

Two years ago, I negotiated bipartisan legislation with a path to citizenship for DACA and TPS recipients, but President Trump profanely dismissed our bill in an infamous meeting in the Oval Office.

Instead, the President is trying to rescind TPS protections and deport hundreds of thousands of immigrants with deep roots in our country.

The Dream and Promise Act has now been pending in the Senate for a year and a half.

On June 22, I sent a letter, signed by all 47 Democratic Senators, calling on Senator Majority Leader McConnell to immediately schedule a vote on the Dream and Promise Act. Nearly six months later, Senator McConnell has not even bothered to reply to our letter.

If Democrats take the majority in the Senate, we would have the opportunity to reestablish the moral authority, credibility, and relevance of the Judiciary Committee.

We would partner with the Biden-Harris Administration, and reach across the aisle to Republicans who are willing to work with us in good faith to repair the damage of the last four years.

With Democrats in the majority, the Judiciary Committee – and then the full Senate – could take up and pass the Dream and Promise Act.

But there is much more to do to fix our broken immigration system and honor our heritage as a nation of immigrants. With Democrats in the majority, we could again advance comprehensive immigration reform legislation.

My Democratic colleagues and I are ready to roll up our sleeves and get to work if we are entrusted with the majority.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be with you today. I look forward to working with you to finally fix our broken immigration system.