

The Immigration Blueprints: A Roadmap to Modernize U.S. Immigration

December 2025

INTRODUCTION

Designing a new immigration system that advances our economic and national security interests requires bold policy solutions that are both visionary and based on practical and operational experience. Over the past eight months, [Hyphen's Immigration Policy Fellows](#)—prominent thought leaders who held senior roles in the federal government spanning three decades and multiple administrations—developed a set of Immigration Blueprints. They are a series of pragmatic, credible, and viable proposals that confront the thorniest issues that policymakers have punted for decades, charting a path forward. The Blueprints offer a roadmap to modernize U.S. immigration and build a new system that is fair, just, and addresses the needs and concerns of the American public.

The Blueprints tackle the most entrenched aspects of our immigration system, including reimagining enforcement and border management to restore integrity, fairness, and proportional consequences. This involves creating new legal pathways and foreign policy measures to deter unauthorized immigration, as well as improving the care and treatment of—and due process for—migrants and unaccompanied children on our soil. In recent years, one thing has become evident: what once kept our immigration system stable no longer works. Record border arrivals, shifting regional migration, and post-COVID pressures make it clear the United States needs a new approach. The Blueprints are a set of proposals that marry modern realities with American values.

Polling data consistently shows that a majority of Americans want a safely-managed border, enforcement that removes public safety and national security threats from our communities, and a path for those who have long resided in and contributed to our communities to stabilize their status.

Hyphen's Fellows have considered these priorities, while beginning to reimagine institutions and norms that are actively being dismantled. Our aim is to contribute ideas and policy solutions that complement and enhance other efforts, visions, and frameworks in the broader immigration policy ecosystem. While many of the proposed ideas in the Blueprints require leaders who are interested in pursuing broader reforms, some ideas are actionable now, either through legislation or appropriations requirements. These policies are just the beginning, and we will continue to update the Blueprints as we pressure test and strengthen these ideas.

ENGAGING WITH THE BLUEPRINT SUMMARIES

Included in this document is a summary of **Big Ideas** and cross-cutting themes from the Blueprints, with examples of practical, solution-oriented policy proposals. The Big Ideas are followed by **Blueprint Summaries** from each of the eight Fellows. They are intended to be considered both individually and collectively. If you are interested in the longer version of the Blueprints, please contact the Hyphen team.

As the Fellows further develop their ideas, Hyphen will continue to engage with diverse stakeholders to strengthen the Fellows' Blueprints, identify points of alignment and tension, and rebuild the contours of a coalition to advance a forward-looking immigration agenda. These stakeholders include: advocacy, policy, and field organizations; state and local governments; and business, labor, national security, and faith leaders. Our work on these issues is not finished. We invite you to engage with the Blueprints as living documents, which will continue to be refined as part of an ongoing and iterative process.

ABOUT

With racial equity as the driving force, [Hyphen](#) works at the nexus of public policy, effective governance, and philanthropy. Our work is fundamentally about leverage and impact. We catalyze multi-sector partnerships, leverage philanthropic leadership and resources, and deploy strategic communications to address urgent needs facing our nation. Hyphen lays the groundwork for long-term transformative change that benefits our broader society, with a particular focus on communities for whom prosperity and the American Dream have long been elusive. Hyphen's Immigration Policy Fellowship is part of its broader mission to create solutions that bridge divides, foster cross-sector collaboration, and produce tangible results for communities across the United States.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Hyphen would like to thank the funders that supported the first phase of this groundbreaking effort: Abundant Futures Fund, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation, Freedom Together Foundation, The James Irvine Foundation, Unbound Philanthropy, and an anonymous donor, along with resources from Fwd.us and the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund for our kick-off summit. In addition, we want to acknowledge the myriad stakeholders who participated in various meetings and conversations, both in groups and one-on-one, to surface points of alignment and tension and provide feedback that strengthened the Blueprints. We would also like to express our gratitude to the Hyphen Immigration Fellows, whose ideas and bold visions for the future will help to move our country in a positive direction on immigration policy. Finally, a heartfelt thank you to the Hyphen team: Felecia Bartow, Amna Farooqi, Cecilia Muñoz, and Daranee Petsod for their leadership in establishing and guiding the Fellowship forward.

CONTACT

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Big Ideas for an Effective, Forward-Looking Immigration System

December 2025

CONTEXT

Designing a new immigration system that advances our economic and national security interests requires bold policy solutions that are both visionary and based on practical and operational experience. Over the past eight months, [Hyphen's Immigration Policy Fellows](#)—prominent thought leaders who held senior roles in the federal government spanning three decades and multiple administrations—developed a set of Immigration Blueprints. They are a series of pragmatic, credible, and viable proposals that confront the thorniest issues that policymakers have punted for decades, charting a path forward. They offer a roadmap to modernize U.S. immigration and build a new system that is fair, just, and addresses the needs and concerns of the American public. This document summarizes the Big Ideas and cross-cutting themes from the Blueprints, with examples of practical, solution-oriented policy proposals. Please see the Blueprint Summaries for further details.

ENFORCEMENT AND BORDER MANAGEMENT

Enforcement and border management are necessary components of any balanced and functioning immigration system. Our Big Ideas aim to restore integrity and fairness, and to create proportionate consequences for those who may be subject to enforcement and removal.

- **Institute an Office of the Civil Detention Trustee** to manage conditions of confinement at all immigration-related detention facilities, including asylum reception centers; oversee procurement and staffing; set detention standards; and respond to oversight findings. This office would help address revolving-door issues, restore trust, establish truly civil detention facilities, and allow operational needs to drive decisions rather than relationships or politics.
- **Create a Custodial Operations Division** to streamline processing; oversee medical, protection, and child welfare-focused staffing; and coordinate with other government entities, such as the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and the Office on Trafficking in Persons, at border processing facilities and relevant ports of entry.
- **Establish an immigration probation program** as an alternative to deportation. Adjudicated through administrative and judicial processes, this program could dramatically reduce immigration court backlogs. The program would include requirements such as payment of taxes and proof of employment or caregiving, and after successfully completing the program, individuals would be eligible for lawful pathways and no longer subject to removal proceedings. This program could be administered as a community-based program through agreements with local governments.

- **Put in place an immigration statute of limitations** to preclude the removal of law-abiding noncitizens after 10 years of residence in the United States, unless the individual is a public safety or national security risk. This statute would prevent long-time residents with strong ties to the United States from facing deportation, and positions them to invest more deeply in their communities.
- **Create return hubs to facilitate the reintegration** of removed individuals to their country of origin, integration into a third country, or access to safe labor and migration pathways elsewhere. Host countries could receive financial support and other incentives to operate these return hub arrangements in partnership with international organizations.

ASYLUM AND REGIONAL SYSTEMS

The U.S. asylum system has long been plagued by massive backlogs, a lack of resources, and a complex web of outdated policies and processes that change between administrations. Our Big Ideas would increase efficiency while ensuring due process and access to legal representation.

- **Provide asylum access only at ports of entry**, barring exceptional humanitarian needs. For those who enter at a port of entry seeking asylum, reception centers would be created to house individuals during the adjudication of asylum claims and provide asylum seekers with resources, such as protection screening and legal services. All cases would be heard by asylum officers, and there would be a limited appeals process.
- **Incentivize extraterritorial asylum applications** and other means of accessing protection outside the United States by: 1) standing up hemispheric screening offices that enable individuals to apply for protection remotely and be screened for other forms of relief in the United States, and to give people the option to be resettled elsewhere in the hemisphere (consider piloting such offices for other global regions); 2) considering refugee resettlement or community/family sponsorship for those who qualify for protection; and 3) funding receiving/transit countries to stand up and augment current in-country protection pathways.
- **Identify and scale promising regional pilots** in Latin America and the Caribbean that could offer innovative policies in the areas of financing, lawful pathways to countries other than the United States, protection systems, and screening and removal cooperation.

LAWFUL PATHWAYS

Our outdated lawful immigration system must meet our evolving needs and tackle long-standing challenges exacerbated by decades of inaction. Creating new immigration pathways would allow us to invest in people who can help meet our current and future workforce needs; reunite families that have made the United States their home; stabilize the status of long-term residents contributing to our communities and economy; and decrease incentives for unauthorized immigration.

- **Establish a visa system to fill national shortages in critical industries** identified by a panel of economists, industry leaders, and labor leaders. After demonstrating a consistent work history, visa holders would have a chance to directly apply for a green card. Similar pathways could be created for students and aspiring entrepreneurs.

- **Allow employers, family members, and other community stakeholders to sponsor long-time undocumented immigrants** to provide them with the opportunity to stabilize their immigration status through community support.
- **Create a visa pathway for state and local governments, in partnership with the federal government**, to meet data-backed local workforce gaps and give workers an opportunity to obtain a green card after contributing to their new communities.
- **Build regional recruitment partnerships** to connect would-be immigrants to new lawful pathways that also serve our national interest, i.e., filling jobs in industries facing a shortage of workers. These partnerships would offer training prior to incoming workers' arrival and educate them about their rights and protections under labor laws, disrupting for-profit entities that exploit the interests of workers and businesses.

GOVERNMENT STRUCTURES AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL COORDINATION

Given the importance of migration on the national and international stage, the U.S. government is poorly equipped to make good decisions and drive coherent policy implementation. Also, immigration policy has long been the sole purview of the federal government and employers, but state and local governments have a direct stake in immigrants' ability to contribute fully to their communities and our economy.

- **Establish and fund a national coordination council across all levels of government** to spearhead the local-to-federal coordination needed around migration in order to improve information flow, efficiency of service delivery, and the overall implementation of immigration policy and programs.
- **Establish migration policy as a priority for national security leaders**, educate them on immigration matters, and build their buy-in for an affirmative migration agenda. Use national security tools, such as diplomacy and innovative financing, to address migration challenges.

DUE PROCESS AND LEGAL REPRESENTATION

Restoring and protecting due process—and providing legal representation—are essential to a transparent and accountable immigration system that protects rights guaranteed under the U.S. Constitution.

- **Mandate guardrails and accountability** alongside any nationality-based entry bans, which should be narrowly tailored to address a compelling government interest in the least restrictive way possible. Likewise, guardrails are needed for third-country removals to ensure a meaningful opportunity to challenge removal and to limit destinations to those that are safe.
- **Re-establish and elevate the role, independence, and authority of an Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties** at the Department of Homeland Security. The office would conduct regular audits of immigration programs, institute a comprehensive anti-discrimination policy, and monitor compliance with enforcement tools for accountability.
- **Invest in federally-funded legal representation** for unaccompanied children and indigent noncitizens in removal proceedings, with matching grants for states and localities that make similar investments.

- **Expand legal services** through 1) a program that certifies and maintains a roster of good-standing attorneys, who may be accessed for pro and low-bono or government-funded programming, and 2) an AmeriCorps-type program for law students.

IMPROVED MECHANISMS TO SUPPORT AND PROTECT IMMIGRANTS

An effective immigration system must not only regulate safe and orderly migration but also protect basic human rights and support the integration of newcomers.

- **Improve the care and treatment of unaccompanied children:** 1) require and fund a feedback mechanism when ORR reports child safety concerns to law enforcement entities; 2) expand ORR's access to various governmental databases for improved sponsor vetting; and 3) increase child welfare expertise at U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) facilities.
- **Improve medical care for immigrants arriving at the border:** create a National Health Service Corps-like program for medical, nursing, and Master of Social Work graduates to support border facilities in two-year rotations.
- **Strengthen support and protections for workers:** 1) support co-location and training for English language learning, access to work authorization, and effective credential and skills-building programs to match labor needs; and 2) provide greater oversight on workplace safety and protection by the Departments of Labor and Justice and other relevant agencies. Immigrant workers who participate in labor and workplace investigations would become eligible for a new visa so they can safely report abuse.

ABOUT HYPHEN

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Interior Enforcement and Alternatives to Detention and Removal

Claire Trickler-McNulty

December 2025

OVERVIEW

The goal of this Blueprint summary is to provide expansive and operationally-realistic recommendations for bold transformation of the current immigration enforcement system. This new vision balances collaboration between state and federal entities in ways that support local communities and safeguard the immigration system through fair and proportionate consequences. This proposal is meant to be considered as a part of a suite of broader systemwide changes that also creates [pathways to legal status for noncitizens](#) in the United States and a new approach to [border management and asylum](#). An exclusively enforcement-centered approach that seeks to remove millions of individuals who do not currently have a path to stay in the United States is unsustainable and inconsistent with our country's values and socioeconomic needs.

This new framework relies on three major concepts:

- Immigration enforcement has become siloed away from immigration benefits and expanded to extremes. Enforcement must be re-balanced at the federal and state level to support the ways that state and local governments are integrating immigrants while also ensuring public safety.
- Some individuals can and should be subject to enforcement action and [removal](#), including those who a) pose a specific and [credible threat to national security](#), b) pose a specific and credible threat to public safety, c) have executable removal orders, and/or d) are not compliant with immigration requirements, including recent unlawful entry.
- In order to address the size and complexity of the immigrant population living and working in the United States without authorization, Congress or the executive could establish options or proportional consequences ("off ramps"), in addition to removal, for those with immigration violations; this will help keep families together, support employers and the economy, and maintain the fabric of local communities.

VISION

Key components of the immigration enforcement lifecycle—from targeting to detention to removal—must be examined and refined. Structural changes within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) will likely be necessary to facilitate these reforms.

There are four major elements to the proposed plan.

1. **Enforcement needs to be smart, targeted, and appropriate.** Rather than the indiscriminate enforcement happening today, individuals who meet priorities for immigration enforcement should be identified through available systems that avoid overly-broad and costly impacts on communities and the economy. New or renewed enforcement priorities should be woven into the system above the field level and focus on those who pose specific and credible threats to national security and public safety, are non-compliant with immigration requirements, and have orders of removal. Transparency and accountability will be key, with clear official guidance on: (1) visible identification to make clear which agency is conducting enforcement operations; (2) where immigration enforcement activities can and cannot occur (i.e., not in sensitive locations, such as hospitals, places of worship, and schools); (3) how arrests that do not fall within the priorities are handled, including auditing and oversight; and (4) a scaled approach to enforcement that outlines specific steps that should be pursued prior to an arrest (e.g., starting at the lowest level contact and moving up as necessary).
2. **Collaboration with state and local governments around immigration enforcement should combine support for integration and economic needs, along with ties to law enforcement and criminal justice systems.** The federal government should refocus its immigration-related [partnerships with state and local governments](#), which are currently centered exclusively around law enforcement, to include community integration, case management, and sponsorship. Under the proposed framework, localities would have the flexibility to join both supportive (sponsorship, alternatives to detention, probation programs) and law enforcement-focused efforts (287(g), CAP, fusion center programs).

Localities should have the flexibility to develop community-based programs, which could combine lawful pathway/sponsorship models, a community-based alternative to detention program, and a new deportation diversion or immigration probation concept outlined below. These would work in tandem with traditional modes of cooperation with local law enforcement, including access to individuals in local prisons and jails. However, localities should also have the ability to tailor how information is shared with local law enforcement—and how, when, and whether individuals are transferred between federal and local systems. It is important to respect the needs of communities to preserve trust and confidence in local law enforcement, and local governments should be able to co-develop metrics alongside federal agencies to assess impacts and make refinements when necessary.

For example, localities could partner with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or another federal agency to establish community-centered alternatives to detention programs, designed to provide stabilization to an individual and their family. For example, these stabilization supports could ensure individuals have housing and services such as medical care that would allow them to fully participate in their immigration case. Non-citizens with certain risk factors, such as transfers from local law enforcement or individuals with pending criminal charges, may be subject to a higher level of monitoring, which could include GPS monitoring or electronic tracking.

3. **The management of all immigration-related detention operations should be moved to a Civil Detention Trustee.** Detention should be reserved for individuals who cannot remain in the community because of a specific and individualized assessment that they are a threat to public safety or national security; those who need to be held for operational reasons, such as detention immediately prior to removal; and those who have not complied with lower-level supervision requirements.

Management of all detention facilities would shift to a new Office of the Civil Detention Trustee within DHS. This office would oversee the procurement and operations of all interior custody locations, including detention facilities and hold rooms, as well as border-related [asylum processing centers](#). Over a set timeline, this office would help move away from private operators and shift to federally-

owned and operated civil detention facilities. This office would also be responsible for setting detention standards and responding to oversight findings. Separating out these functions would be a critical step toward addressing revolving door issues (i.e., individuals in leadership at the agency going to work for private contractors) and letting operational needs drive decisions rather than relationships or politics.

- 4. Establish immigration probation as a deportation diversion or alternative to removal.** To allow for a balancing of equities and proportional consequences that align with the new enforcement priorities described above, an alternative-to-removal option also needs to be created. To meet this need, a two-year “deportation diversion” or “immigration probation” program could be made available through administrative and judicial processes, depending on the individual case. Individuals who have removal orders or other factors making them ineligible for existing options to regularize their status, such as low-level criminality (e.g., non-violent crimes, traffic or juvenile offenses, or immigration-related offenses), could seek probation through an application process. The program could become an ongoing option for immigration judges, who could order relief from removal, issue an order of removal, or place an individual in the proposed immigration probation program. Upon successful completion of probation, individuals would be removed from the immigration court docket, reducing backlogs and pressure on the system as a whole. Individuals would also be eligible to adjust their status based on the lawful pathways for which they may be eligible.

The program would include requirements for reporting, employment or caregiving, and payment of all taxes and back-taxes. It could be run through state and local partnerships or through grants or contracts with non-profit providers.

The program could be established through legislation or through executive action. Through executive action, individuals could have proceedings terminated, receive deferred action, and cure their entry. If established through legislation, individuals would ideally be eligible for additional lawful pathways and receive a waiver of all inadmissibility grounds.

CONCLUSION

The immigration enforcement system as it is currently functioning is costly, inhumane, and ineffective. It prioritizes profit over people and punishment over process; it is indiscriminately sweeping up U.S. citizens and others who are lawfully present; and it is not serving the economic, social or humanitarian interests of the country. True reform will require a large-scale overhaul of enforcement processes and detention, as well as an investment in systems rooted in dignity, fairness, and due process. The time for bold, structural change is now.

A Blueprint for Humane Removals

Royce Bernstein Murray

December 2025

Any fair, balanced, and functioning immigration system will necessarily include mechanisms to remove people who do not establish a basis for remaining in the United States. That includes removals to one's country of origin or, in limited instances, to another country that will accept them and afford their safety. But the [excesses of present-day immigration enforcement policies](#) and practices call for a rethinking of removal practices, including robust guardrails to ensure that deportations are humane and respect the rule of law.

The purpose of this paper is to present a new framework that: 1) secures removals cooperation from other countries; 2) excludes law-abiding, long-time residents as well as those granted refugee-like protections from removal; 3) ensures third-country removals are rare, safe, and not coercive; 4) offers financial and case management support to those who freely choose to leave; and 5) assists those returning to their country of origin with access to alternative migration pathways and reintegration services.

1. SECURING REMOVALS COOPERATION

A whole-of-government approach is needed to facilitate timely cooperation from other countries to accept the return of their nationals. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) cannot remove a noncitizen to their country of nationality without that country agreeing to accept them, and cooperation from foreign governments is required to confirm an individual's identity and issue travel documents. When a foreign state fails to timely cooperate, DHS may need to release the removable individual from custody or forego efforts to remove them. The inability to remove large numbers of people to their country of origin can shape their compatriots' decisions to migrate to the United States and can leave them at risk of removal to a third country. DHS alone cannot use its limited authorities to incentivize countries into compliance; the White House and State Department must work with DHS to [make removals cooperation an integral part of a bilateral relationship](#), offering a broad range of carrots and sticks to secure it.

2. LIMITING REMOVAL FOR CERTAIN POPULATIONS

The harm communities are experiencing from high-volume, indiscriminate immigration enforcement practices demonstrates the need for a new approach that limits removals of individuals with long-established ties to the United States or who have met the definition of "refugee" when they were granted protection known as "withholding of removal."

A. Statute of Limitations for Removals

The U.S. government could apply a Statute of Limitations (SOL) framework to removals, as we do throughout much of criminal and civil law. The SOL concept is well-understood and accepted as limiting enforcement of the law for many older violations, while acknowledging that the law has been broken. This approach prioritizes resources for more recent violations, and assumes that there is a diminished value of deterrence through prosecution with the passage of time. In the immigration context, there is a shifting of equities as well, with a noncitizen typically forming strong family, employment, and community ties over time. These ties benefit not only the individual and their family, but also their larger communities and the economy, which [outweigh the value of removing them](#) from the United States. Once a noncitizen has been in the United States for 10 years or more without a criminal conviction, DHS should apply a SOL and forbear immigration enforcement. Certain new violations of law that render an individual inadmissible or removable could reset the 10-year window, but discretion would need to be exercised for cases involving serious criminal convictions.

B. Reforms to Withholding of Removal

Individuals who meet the legal definition of a refugee may be ineligible for asylum based on a statutory bar (such as failing to meet the one-year deadline to apply) or regulations that limit [access to asylum at the southern border](#). However, they may have established eligibility for “withholding of removal,” which protects individuals from being removed to a country where they fear persecution *but not to other countries* that agree to accept them. Prior to the current administration, sending individuals granted withholding of removal to a third country was a rare practice, given the level of diplomatic effort required to identify an appropriate third country and limited interest in prioritizing removal of these individuals in light of competing demands. Congress could eliminate the authority to remove to a third country refugees who need a secure and permanent refuge. Until that occurs, DHS should refrain from removing individuals granted withholding of removal to a third country.

3. ENSURING SAFETY OF THIRD COUNTRY REMOVALS

Third-country removals are an essential tool for DHS to use when (1) foreign governments fail to cooperate on removals of their nationals in a timely manner, and (2) individuals who are unable to return to their home country and present significant public safety or national security concerns that prevent their release into the United States. These removals should be used as a last resort, include [due process protections](#), and only be conducted to an appropriate country where an individual can safely reside.

A. Meaningful Opportunity to Challenge Third Country Removals

The designation of one’s removal country is guided by existing law, and while priority is placed on locations where the individual has existing ties, removal is ultimately permitted to any country that will accept them. Under present guidance, removals to third countries can occur swiftly if there are credible diplomatic assurances the individual will not be persecuted or harmed there. Without such assurances, individuals are provided 24 hours notice of where they are being removed to – or in exigent circumstances, as few as six hours. These due process protections are wholly insufficient to ensure an individual’s safety in an unfamiliar country. Individuals must be given adequate notice and a meaningful

opportunity to challenge their removal to a third country, including access to counsel to do so. Those removed could be connected to integration support to facilitate their transition and explore alternative migration pathways, such as labor or education pathways, if desired.

B. Third Country Removals must be Appropriate and Safe

Third-country removals must be effectuated to places that are safe and that do not present circumstances that are so dangerous or distant that the purpose is to intimidate or coerce individuals into self-deportation. DHS should work with the State Department to identify locations where an individual has existing ties, a shared language, or other prospects to safely integrate. We must secure guarantees that once removed to a third country, individuals will not be removed again to a country of feared persecution or where they could be incarcerated at our behest.

4. PROVIDING ASSISTANCE TO THOSE WHO VOLUNTARILY DEPART

Individuals who freely decide to return to their country of origin and need financial aid or other support could be provided with federal assistance in doing so. DHS should not conduct high-pressure ad campaigns or otherwise coerce people in custody to self-deport. Instead, the department should provide contracted case management services that help people arrange their affairs in the United States prior to departure, purchase or provide transportation to their country of origin, and plan for reintegration. The Department of Justice should make available contracted legal orientations to help individuals understand the implications of departing on any pending immigration case.

5. ASSISTING WITH REINTEGRATION AND ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS

In partnership with amenable countries, international organizations, multilateral development banks, philanthropy, and the private sector, the U.S. government could invest in standing up return hubs abroad that facilitate return and reintegration to one's country of origin, integration into a third country, and access to safe labor and migration pathways elsewhere. Host countries that can safely accommodate individuals pending onward movement or local integration could receive financial and other incentives to successfully operate these return hubs. Building and strengthening relationships with all of these key partners will help ensure that migration is cooperatively managed, returns are conducted humanely, and skills and opportunities can be matched for the maximum benefit of all.

Border Management and Asylum Reforms

Ashley Feasley

December 2025

VISION

The following Blueprint summary lays out a border management and asylum reform framework that reflects the necessity of: (1) maintaining an orderly and secure border; (2) updating and improving existing infrastructure and technology to promote a steady state of future cross-border flow; and (3) reforming the asylum system, to facilitate larger immigration policy goals. This Blueprint summary offers ideas to increase efficiency, fairness, security, due process, and operational continuity at U.S. borders. It also provides recommendations for pursuing immediate and longer-term border management and asylum reforms.

BACKGROUND/CONTEXT

From the early 2000s until 2024, arrivals to the U.S.-Mexico border increased, while the demographics of who was arriving – and how they were arriving – changed. In the 1990s to early 2000s, the vast majority of arrivals were Mexican men, seeking employment and infrequently requesting asylum. In recent years, larger numbers of non-Mexican families and children have been arriving from a broader range of countries and routinely seeking asylum. In addition, the increased sophistication of migrant smuggling networks that operate with/as part of transnational criminal organizations have impacted how individuals arrive, how they encounter border officials, and what form(s) of relief they may be seeking. The decades-long failure to achieve legislative reform and create permanent lawful pathways has severely limited the legal avenues available to individuals seeking entry to the United States. These developments led to impacts on the U.S. border management and asylum system that far outpaced existing infrastructure and administrative capacities.

The current administration's enforcement-only policies have dramatically decreased border encounters. And while [recent polling](#) indicates that there is continued public support for the current approach to border management, there is also a [public appetite](#) for more efficient and humane border policies that provide for long-lasting security. The proposed policy ideas in this Blueprint summary seek to promote safe, efficient, humane, and orderly borders and meaningful asylum reform.

BORDER MANAGEMENT

Pragmatic border management centers on an understanding that migration can be cyclical and also influenced by global and regional events, leading to inconsistent flows of goods and people. Solid

border management policies can help address these challenges, including mitigating influxes, as well as simultaneously prioritizing security, trade, and safety for all. While encounter numbers are currently very low, border environments evolve and require modernization to keep pace with trade and migration flows. The following recommendations offer border infrastructure updates in key priority areas: border barriers and intelligence gathering, facilitation of trade, and humane care for those in custody. They are designed to respond to credible threats, commercial goals, and modern realities.

- **Improved technology and intelligence to fortify border barriers and environments.** We need modern border security that protects physical U.S. borders, but also uses intelligence to detect in advance threats to border safety. These elements could include:
 - Adopting a sector-by-sector approach to the border wall and barriers that reflects input from community stakeholders and addresses geographic, encounter, climate factors with sector-specific responses aligned to larger border security goals.
 - Employing technology, such as drones, unattended surveillance sensors, and AI, for better “information sifting” of criminal activity, while ensuring ethical usage.
 - Broadening engagement with Western Hemisphere countries to align law enforcement efforts and coordinate on outbound/inbound enforcement operations related to arms, fentanyl, and other drug trafficking and smuggling.
 - Hiring and training new Border Patrol agents, investing in multidisciplinary training, including on professional responsibility initiatives, and ensuring better workplace safety and mental health supports.
- **Infrastructure updates to augment trade, improve land screening and detection of contraband, and address looming staffing issues.** Trade is paramount to the U.S. economy. Accordingly, we need comprehensive upgrades to ports of entry (POE) and technology to screen goods. Potential approaches could include:
 - Advancing large-scale updates to border facilities and land, sea, and air POEs. These should be prioritized in a tiered schedule according to need, national competitiveness, and volume of arrivals and trade.
 - Robustly implementing technology like AI and non-intrusive inspection systems.
 - Continuing support for the Office of Field Operations (OFO) to develop streamlined processes and innovations, such as the Trusted Traveler program, to achieve advanced vetting and faster processing, with a special focus on land border innovation and development of better screening technology for the land environment.
 - Fortifying relationships with Mexico and Canada on trade, arms, and drug contraband detection, and ensuring automated sensors and license plate readers at all land POEs.
 - Retaining experienced OFO staff and addressing looming 2028 retirement shortages.
- **Care-in-custody policies and infrastructure to address recent arrival demographics.** There have been large increases in children and families arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border in the last 15 years. Even with current low level of U.S.-Mexico encounters, there are families and children who are still arriving by air and at northern border POEs, where they often remain in U.S. Customs and Border

Patrol (CBP) custody for days. A focus on improving policies involving the custody of such populations is vital to ensuring humane treatment, reducing liability, and preventing death and illness. Such policy suggestions could include:

- Creating a Custodial Operations Division that owns all processing facilities and staffing contracts, and oversees as part of its work a division of medical, protection, and child welfare-focused professionals to staff processing facilities.
- Allowing an [Office of Refugee Resettlement presence](#) in facilities that process unaccompanied children (UC), and reinforce existing CBP UC border screening processes outlined in the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act.
- Facilitating public reporting on migrants in custody and border deaths in support of future oversight and to inform necessary changes to care-in-custody policies.
- Creating a National Health Service Corps-like program for medical, nursing, and Masters of Social Work graduates to do two-year rotations in border facilities.

Lastly, conditions at the U.S.-Mexico border can change quickly due to any number of factors, including political, economic, and climate instability, as well as changes in migration patterns and regional cooperation. Given this reality, consideration could be given to centralizing existing federal government incident response and command systems beyond the Department of Homeland Security and involving impacted stakeholders, including city and state government and civil society partners. Heightened responses to changing conditions at the border could include increased funding and deployment of [intergovernmental teams](#).

ASYLUM REFORM

Failed legislative efforts have led to an outdated immigration system and a dearth of lawful pathways, with asylum becoming the only permanent option for those seeking to enter the United States. Currently, asylum access at the U.S.-Mexico border no longer exists due to recent administrative actions. However, [polling](#) indicates that a majority of Americans want to maintain the right to asylum, but that it should be [restricted](#) when the border is “overwhelmed.” It is important to strike a balance between offering protection for those fleeing persecution, bringing order to a system that has been abused by smuggling networks, and ensuring robust vetting of anyone seeking asylum.

The right to seek asylum at U.S. borders and ports of entry is an important value we should uphold but look to reform. Ideally, meaningful asylum reforms would acknowledge that substantial structural changes are needed. While asylum seekers should have access to due process, it is unsustainable for them to wait for years to receive an outcome. This is not in the national interest nor does it serve those seeking protection. This Blueprint summary is organized around three main goals: (1) reducing the size of the asylum-seeking population by discouraging spurious applications, looking to streamline and shorten asylum grants for those with obvious and less complex genuine protection claims, and screening for eligibility for other forms of relief; (2) reducing adjudication times; and (3) increasing due process and transparency. All three elements also reflect the inherent need to continually vet applicants for national security and community safety threats. Specific recommendations include:

- **Reducing the size of the asylum-seeking population that needs formal adjudication by expanding access to lawful pathways, providing advanced protection screening, and maintaining stricter border accessibility.** This goal reflects the need to maintain the right to access asylum at U.S. borders but also to incentivize extra-territorial applications, and expand lawful pathways and other means of accessing protection. Advanced screening also provides greater opportunity for extensive vetting. Possible solutions could include:
 - Standing up numerous Hemispheric screening offices that enable individuals to apply for protection remotely and also to be screened for other forms of relief, including family reunification and temporary employment options. Look to expand screening offices on a pilot basis to help efficiently screen for other global regional protection needs and regulate regional migration.
 - Ensuring there are [robust lawful pathways](#) for those who may not qualify for asylum but whose entrance into the United States is in the national interest.
 - Considering refugee resettlement or community/family sponsorship for those who qualify for protection remotely, with continual vetting as a pre-requisite for eligibility.
 - Funding receiving/transit countries to stand up and augment current in-country protection [pathways](#), such as Mexico's humanitarian visas.
 - Allowing asylum only at POEs (with humanitarian exceptions) to ensure greater response capacity at the U.S. border.
 - Utilizing protection case profiles, based on individuals' nationality and protection risks (e.g., religion, political affiliation, "pattern and practice" information) to categorize certain cases as "very likely to be granted" or "unlikely to qualify," both of which would be given an automatic decision, barring security review.
- **Reducing adjudication times for asylum claims.** Possible solutions could include:
 - Empowering asylum officers to conduct merits screenings, grant and deny asylum, and effectuate removals without automatic involvement of an immigration judge.
 - Creating open-campus reception centers (not run by CBP or ICE) that would [house](#) individuals during the adjudication of asylum claims and provide asylum seekers with resources, such as protection screening and legal services. Individuals should have adequate due process protections and be guaranteed an outcome within a period of 60-180 days. Extensive real-time vetting would also occur.
 - Considering community/family sponsorship or alternatives to detention coupled with bond and/or electronic monitoring for certain pre-selected asylum seekers, who have been pre-vetted for national security or community safety risks.
 - Applying protection profiles and updated vetting advancements to applicable asylum backlog cases for faster outcomes.
 - Ensuring the opportunity for speedy review in certain asylum denial cases.
 - Implementing time-bound and humane [removal](#) mechanisms once it is determined that an individual does not qualify for asylum or other eligible forms of relief.

- Ensuring all government agencies receive funding proportionate to costs associated with the asylum process (i.e., enforcement funding for 1,000 asylum seekers would be matched with resources for interviewing and adjudicating 1,000 asylum cases).
- **Increasing due process and transparency in the asylum system.** The current asylum system is opaque and difficult to navigate. Additionally, immigration courts need to be overhauled to ensure greater long-term continuity, credibility, and impartiality. Possible solutions could include:
 - Utilizing greater access to legal information and services in the form of legal orientation, accreditation, case navigators and friend-of-the-court programs, and for the most vulnerable, access to government-funded legal services. Work with law schools, universities, retired lawyers, and interested faith and labor communities to help scale capacity, and consider an AmeriCorps-type program for law students.
 - Restructuring the immigration courts as Article I courts.
 - Providing robust funding for immigration judges, support staff, court space, and technology.
 - Funding U.S. government country conditions research, and forming an independent quality assurance board for country-of-origin information with volunteer experts invited by the U.S. Government Accountability Office.
 - Utilizing technology, such as electronic filing, text messaging, and other automated processes, such as an electronic scheduling system.

Immigration Pathways for the Future

Felicia Escobar Carrillo

December 2025

The United States' legal immigration system has largely remained unchanged since 1990. Over the past 35 years, the U.S. population has grown by almost 100 million, with major demographic shifts among working age and aging populations, at the same time birth rates have been declining. With the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), workplaces will be further transformed, creating both new opportunities and potential displacement of workers. While it will be critical to reskill workers impacted by these changes, demographic trends suggest continued immigration will be necessary if we wish to spur economic growth and to meet workforce gaps in specific industries. Indeed, immigrants are [essential drivers of economic growth](#), fueling consumption, investment, innovation, talent, and tax revenues. Moreover, they introduce new perspectives and traditions, making our economy more vibrant and dynamic.

A [record number of Americans](#) believe immigration is good for our country, but they want it to be fair and orderly, aligned with our country's needs, and grounded in our values, which include rewarding hard work and reuniting families. We must reform our outdated lawful immigration system by creating new pathways that meet our evolving needs and tackle long-standing challenges exacerbated by decades of inaction. This paper offers a new vision for future lawful immigration pathways that, ideally, would be pursued as a part of a larger set of reforms that include new approaches to [interior enforcement](#), [removals](#), and [border management and asylum](#).

I. NEW VISION FOR THE IMMIGRANT VISA SYSTEM

We should increase the availability of lawful immigrant visa pathways, rather than further expand temporary pathways that hinder individuals' ability to fully contribute to our nation, leave them susceptible to exploitation, and create instability for U.S. businesses. Doing so would allow our country to invest in people who can help us meet our future workforce needs and who have already decided to make the United States their home.

Fill national shortages in critical industries. Our employment-sponsored immigration categories are severely outdated and focus almost exclusively on highly-specialized industries, to the exclusion of others facing critical shortages. Furthermore, numeric limits for these categories were set for a 1990s economy, unfairly tying workers' futures to specific employers, making them vulnerable to abuse, and limiting their potential contributions. We should offer a new lawful pathway to fill nationally-recognized workforce shortages, and give individuals the opportunity to directly apply for a green card, after demonstrating a consistent work history. The availability of these visas would be tied to a data-driven set of industries facing acute shortages (e.g., caregiving, health care, and agriculture), as well as fields driving innovation

that have demonstrated workforce needs. Immigrant visa numbers and annual caps would also need to be reformed so that eligible workers would not have to wait years for an available green card.

Address local community needs. State and local governments have limited levers to participate in the federal immigration system, despite the outsized role that immigrants play in fueling and sustaining local economies. Offering a new pathway to state and local governments would allow communities to meet critical, localized workforce gaps, and provide immigrant workers an opportunity to obtain a green card after they have invested in and contributed to their new communities. State and local needs would be identified in consultation with labor, business, and community leaders, and corroborated with evidence from credible data sources. States and localities would benefit from federal support to navigate our immigration system and to ensure new workers are matched with local job opportunities. Ideally, this new labor pathway would be part of [a larger set of solutions](#) to empower local leaders to play a greater role in the system.

Maximize investments in students and entrepreneurs. By creating a direct pathway for students and entrepreneurs to earn a green card, we can incentivize talented international students to stay and work after they graduate from U.S. colleges and universities, as well as those who want to start new businesses and create jobs in our country. To gain initial access to this pathway, graduates would be required to have a job offer related to their field of study upon graduating. After establishing a track-record of employment, they would be eligible to apply for a green card. Similarly, entrepreneurs would be required to demonstrate that they have attracted a threshold level of investment to initially qualify, and would only be eligible for a green card after they have established a successful and growing business.

Invest in families. Families should not be placed in a line for an unattainable visa. While family reunification is the primary aim, they contribute greatly, as workers entrepreneurs, and consumers, fueling economic growth. Reforms to our outdated preference categories and country caps are needed so that U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents are not forced to wait years to be reunited with their spouses and children. We should also invest in efforts that allow us to take full advantage of family-sponsored immigrants' potential as workers and entrepreneurs by investing in the public workforce system and increasing access to job training and credentialing, as well as providing more support to immigrants starting small businesses.

II. RESPONSIBLE RECRUITMENT AND STRENGTHENED PROTECTIONS FOR INCOMING WORKERS

Creating lawful pathways for immigrants to enter the United States is critical, but we also must ensure future workers are not abused and exploited in the process. Such abuse and exploitation not only harms the workers themselves, but also undermines conditions for American workers. To achieve this, policymakers must take steps to promote responsible recruitment practices, increase oversight and monitoring, and protect workers who report abuse and exploitation.

Build regional recruitment partnerships. In order to build a talent pipeline, we could build regional partnerships that set up immigrant workers for success, even before they arrive in the United States. These types of partnerships can help ensure workers are matched with jobs for which they are best suited; that they understand their workplace rights and are prepared to integrate in their new communities; and that they are able to maintain ties to their home countries, which could provide greater visibility into foreign recruitment practices. These partnerships would also support employers in identifying the workers they need to address workforce gaps. During the Biden Administration, several

country-based partnerships were launched to create pipelines for temporary seasonal and agricultural worker programs. We can draw lessons from those programs, as well as similar efforts in other countries to establish stronger partnerships to support workers, employers, and communities.

Promote transparency and accountability among private foreign recruiters. In recent years, the federal government took steps to reduce workers' vulnerability to exploitation by foreign recruiters, but more could be done to ensure that those who engage in unlawful activity are held accountable. Policymakers should increase transparency and accountability by making information about recruitment agencies used by U.S. companies more accessible, and requiring recruitment agencies to register with the federal government. This information could be available to oversight agencies and the general public, but also to potential workers so they can make informed decisions about who they engage to secure employment in the United States.

Invest in oversight of labor and worksite enforcement. Federal enforcement of existing temporary worker and permanent visa processes has been woefully underfunded for decades. If we expand lawful pathways for future workers, robust oversight is needed to ensure employers comply with all visa-related requirements and to protect against abuse and exploitative practices. This could include providing resources to the Departments of Labor, Homeland Security, and Justice to conduct audits and site visits, launch investigations, and prosecute and penalize bad actors.

Create a new visa pathway for abused and exploited workers. Abused and exploited workers are often scared to report workplace violations, fearing they will lose their immigration status or work authorization—or worse, that they will be removed from the United States before unscrupulous employers are held accountable. Building on the Deferred Action for Lawful Enforcement process launched in 2023, policymakers could create a new visa, similar to the U and T visas for victims of crime and trafficking, which would allow workers to safely report abuse (e.g., wage theft, unsafe conditions) and participate in labor and workplace investigations.

III. BRING TRANSPARENCY AND DYNAMISM TO FUTURE IMMIGRATION LEVELS

Policymakers should task a new federal body with evaluating the impact of any new lawful immigration pathways on U.S. workplaces and communities, and making recommendations on necessary adjustments. This entity could gather input from federal officials managing implementation efforts; tap on-the-ground insights of state and local governments, representatives from key sectors, and community leaders; and consider a variety of demographic and economic data to assess future immigration needs. This body would make recommendations to the President, who could administratively adjust immigration levels with necessary guardrails. For instance, if a future administration wished to significantly decrease or increase immigration levels, they would be required to seek Congressional approval to do so.

IV. ADDRESS CHALLENGES CAUSED BY INACTION

After years of inaction, the immigrant visa backlog continues to grow, with individuals regularly waiting years – and for some, several decades – to receive their green cards. Moreover, millions of hardworking, undocumented immigrants have spent decades waiting for an opportunity to earn a path to citizenship, while building strong connections with employers, community members, and others who are eager to support them in their journey to gain lawful status.

Unlock the talents of families and workers waiting in the backlogs. Additional immigrant visas should be authorized to clear existing backlogs for family-sponsored and employer-sponsored immigrant visas over a set period of time. As a first step, we could create a new transitional non-immigrant visa that would allow certain individuals to enter the United States, work, and begin building their lives in our country, while they wait for their family-sponsored green cards.

Build a sponsor-based pathway for long-term undocumented community members. Increasingly, everyday Americans are supporting long-term undocumented community members caught up in extreme and aggressive enforcement actions, and there remains strong public support for creating a pathway for undocumented immigrants to stabilize their immigration status. To harness this energy, we could establish a sponsor-based lawful pathway for undocumented immigrants. Sponsorship has been embedded in our nation's immigration policy landscape for decades, with several successful programs implemented for humanitarian, border security, and family unity purposes in recent years. Through the proposed pathway, community members, employers, and family members could sponsor undocumented immigrants, which would put them on a path to become lawful permanent residents. Like many sponsor-based visa programs, these immigrants would be eligible to naturalize five years after obtaining lawful permanent residence. Sponsors would be required to be fully vetted and screened; agree to financially support those they sponsor if they fall on hard times; and provide a statement detailing the sponsored individual's contributions to their family, business, or community. Beneficiaries would have to submit biometrics and pass background checks, pay taxes, and pay an application fee and a surcharge to support efforts to monitor and investigate any potential fraud in the program.

Due Process Protections and National Security

Avideh Moussavian

December 2025

OVERVIEW

Our immigration system is too often viewed as inviting security and economic risk to our country rather than opportunities for our communities and local economies to thrive. Vetting policies have often been designed to find the proverbial needle in the haystack and, when driven by fear, are quick to abandon - or willingly disregard - due process protections that are enshrined in the Constitution. The end result is a false choice between our safety and security on the one hand, and our rights and community prosperity achieved through immigration on the other.

This dichotomy paves the way for reactionary and restrictionist immigration policies and shuts out those seeking to enter and remain in the United States. [These barriers lead to economic losses, missed opportunities for innovation, painful family separation, and diminished credibility and standing in the global arena and in matters of foreign policy.](#) Overly broad standards for national security concerns that prioritize rhetoric over legal standards can also impede efficient and effective vetting of immigration applications. Layering on more screening, when it is not always effective, just adds more hay to the haystack.

The current environment, where generalized national security concerns and wartime authorities have been invoked in unprecedented ways, highlights how failures of due process in our immigration system hurts all of us. The public is now more willing to question - rather than reflexively defer to - claims of national security used to justify immigration policy and see treatment of immigrants as a test case for weakening democratic norms. For example, military presence in cities across the United States is increasingly seen as a costly and wasteful executive power grab and threat to our First Amendment rights. These actions are not a serious attempt to address legitimate safety or security concerns and instead erode trust in our federal government.

This tug-of-war dynamic between constitutional due process protections and blanket national security policies has lived in the DNA of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) since its inception. Created in response to the 9/11 attacks, DHS consolidated 23 different agencies, with vastly divergent and incoherent responsibilities. Placing the adjudication of immigration applications at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration services (USCIS) within DHS - alongside law enforcement functions of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) - embedded the perception that immigrants pose an inherent national security threat.

Refining when and how we invoke national security concerns as they relate to our immigration system can better advance shared economic, social, and security interests without conflating immigrants as a

generalized threat. A more balanced approach is possible; one that demands due process as an essential component of, rather than creating tension with, our national security interests. This also aligns with the interests of our country as a whole, as any erosion of due process protections for noncitizens may serve as a precursor for stripping U.S. citizens of these same constitutional rights.

The goals of this Blueprint summary are to:

- Advance a more elevated, balanced, and durable role for meaningful due process in any national security policy framework that impacts our immigration system and noncitizens;
- Restore the central role of due process in our immigration system in advancing our overall security and economic interests and as part of a functioning and fair society; and
- Inform key messengers who can champion and build lasting support for protecting Constitutional rights of noncitizens as a means of protecting them for all Americans.

ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF A FORWARD-LOOKING VISION

- I. Prioritize quality (effectiveness) over quantity (one-size-fits-all) in immigration screening and vetting policies.** Screening and vetting policies should apply consistently to all applicants in the United States applying for immigration relief, without grinding an entire program to a halt or discriminating against specific communities. DHS should invest in auditing to address security concerns in a narrow and targeted manner, with clear and transparent guidance on database and system vetting rules (including the use of AI), evidentiary standards and the use and weight of information. Any policy contemplating the use, consideration and evidentiary weight given to social media should be bound to First Amendment considerations that would restrict when, if ever, it can be used, and mandate robust guardrails, such as only relying on credible and culturally-competent evidence that balances efficiency with specificity. USCIS should conduct periodic audits and review of immigration programs, with quality assurance benchmarks. This will reduce the risk of agency (over) reaction to external scrutiny and pressures, rather than use the blunt force of suspending operations.
- II. Require all cases to be completed on a targeted timeline and provide transparency in immigration decisions.** Absent clear guidance on how to weigh evidence against potential national security concerns, adjudicating officers may sometimes avoid issuing a final decision (or elevating cases for a final decision), leaving cases to languish under the guise of “unresolved vetting.” Applicants in the United States whose requests for immigration relief are denied do not always know what evidence was used against them, nor do they have the opportunity to rebut it. Given the high stakes, decisions related to immigration applications are most defensible when they provide as much transparency as possible, with an opportunity for applicants to respond to evidence used against them.
- III. Invest in personnel and address structural biases and reforms.** DHS should implement robust anti-discrimination policies with mandatory training, including on bias, assessment of evidence, and constitutional due process protections. Additionally, internal investigation units should work with subject matter experts to design proactive audits. This would help mitigate the consequences of audits conducted on an ad hoc basis, where investigations risk ending up as fishing expeditions, without regard for the particular characteristics, vulnerabilities, or cultural/community competencies that are highly relevant to defining an actual security risk. Any regular auditing will be most effective if it includes subject matter experts who understand the relevant population characteristics (e.g., unaccompanied immigrant youth, survivors of gender-based violence, etc.).

- IV. Require guardrails and accountability with nationality-based entry bans.** Specific limits on any President's authority to issue entry bans must protect against religious or nationality-based discrimination. This includes requiring: (1) a considered and consultative process with DHS and the State Department, and (2) a time limit and sufficiently narrow approach to address a compelling government interest in the least restrictive way. Additional limits on this executive authority should include requiring DHS and the State Department to regularly report to Congress on the security, cost, economic impacts, and efficacy of such bans – including any waiver provision. Finally, a right of timely recourse should be available to those who wish to challenge the application of any such ban to their case.
- V. Invest in legal representation for indigent noncitizens in removal proceedings.** Federal funding could be appropriated to [supplement state and local investments](#) in representation for indigent noncitizens in removal proceedings, with [priority given to those in detention](#) until further scaling up is possible. Rather than basing access to counsel on the likely outcome of a case, it could be available for those who meet reasonable indigency definitions or fall within a sliding scale of income-based eligibility.
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CONCLUSION

Our current challenges are the cumulative result of a deeply-rooted narrative that immigrants are a primary threat to our national security. While this narrative long pre-dates 9/11, as evidenced through the Chinese Exclusion Act and the incarceration of Japanese-Americans during World War II, it became deeply ingrained with the creation of DHS. The reality, however, is that all of us, including immigrants, value our safety and security. When due process protections are viewed as a “nice-to-have” in our immigration system – and something we cannot afford to prioritize against our national security interests – a dangerous precedent is set for all of us. Building the muscle for commitment to the constitutional right to due process, in policy and practice, is a contributing force, not an obstacle, to our shared national security interests.

Local Community and Government Interests

Bitta Mostofi

December 2025

OVERVIEW

Our federal immigration system is outdated and frequently out of touch with the sentiments and needs of local communities across the country. Further, decades of inaction have only deepened the public's distrust of federal leadership to take on real challenges or center the lives and needs of people across the country. This lack of confidence is a barrier to advancing much needed immigration policy change.

Local leaders are certainly not uniform in their reaction to these realities, but they agree that federal immigration laws and policies have long failed to serve or consider local interests, and have instead created uncertainty felt acutely in their backyards. For example, overreach in immigration enforcement has generated heightened fear in communities with long-term immigrant residents. This creates economic, social, and safety consequences that become incredibly difficult for local leaders to address when they lack control over the laws that govern immigration status or enforcement. Conversely, when large numbers of immigrants enter the United States, particularly at the U.S.-Mexico border, there have been limited attempts by the federal government to ensure that cities and municipalities across the country are provided with adequate support to receive and integrate the new arrivals.

Our constitution and federalist system charge local government leaders with responsibility for residents' public health and safety. The totality of these policy areas encompasses education, healthcare, local law enforcement, economic opportunity and more. Thus, it begs the question: why do we overlook the role of local leaders in contributing to a positive and supportive federal immigration framework? More importantly, why do we limit their ability to engage in narrow spheres of [enforcement that do not respond to, or include, a balancing of local interests](#) and to a degree in refugee resettlement? In doing so, we shortchange our ability to connect critical dots when immigrant residents can help resolve social disparities, fuel economic growth, and ensure all communities can thrive.

OPPORTUNITY

In order to get the solutions right, we must strengthen the role of local communities and leaders in the development and implementation of immigration policy.

Many local leaders proudly represent and maintain that their efforts to welcome immigrants have led to solutions that better integrate newcomers and support community interests. They also work with a diverse set of stakeholders, from business and labor leaders to faith-based and non-profit organizations.

Yet, on an issue like immigration, which has a tremendous impact at the local level, leaders are left operating in narrow spheres of power, control, and resources to further these responsibilities and values. This has often resulted in a deep frustration and unfortunate politicization of policy solutions.

By creating a more intentional, and positive inclusion of local interests—and by extension local leaders—in national immigration policy matters, national leaders are more likely to get policy solutions right, create much-needed implementation partnerships, and empower local leaders to help ensure success of the overall system and the people accessing it.

BLUEPRINT FOR INCORPORATION OF LOCAL INTERESTS

Key areas of the national immigration program that could elevate local voices are coordination, integration, and pathways to lawful status. Possible solutions include:

- **Building intentional coordination infrastructure across all levels of government.** Investing in coordination infrastructure between the national government and local leaders will help to ensure that policy and programmatic solutions are responsive to local needs, can be effectively implemented, and can adapt when migration shifts occur. This requires effective bi-directional understanding and where possible, training, information sharing, and partnership. To accomplish these goals, recommendations include: (1) creating a White House Intergovernmental Council on Immigration to facilitate local-to-national coordination, and providing incentives for participating state governments to create parallel infrastructure at the state and local level; (2) providing resources to state and local governments to create readiness coordinators responsible for assessing and implementing local response initiatives for newly-arriving and long-term immigrant residents, while measuring their effectiveness; (3) removing population restrictions on the role of state refugee coordinators, who presently are funded to serve refugee populations only; and (4) [establishing and maintaining federal funding mechanisms to support border community management and delivery of services that can be adjusted as needed](#).
- **Investing in and partnering on integration efforts as critical to the success and contributions of long-term and newly-arrived immigrants.** By and large the federal government leaves integration of immigrants to local communities. Many local leaders have taken significant steps to meet these needs because they have seen – through data and experience – that smart policy and program design can lead to significant, positive impacts on a person's or family's ability to thrive and contribute to their community. Several issue areas could serve as priority approaches that further shared government, community, and business goals.
- **Workforce:** Our public workforce system and programs must be more responsive to community and labor needs. Cities and states have taken new and effective steps to improve worker outcomes, but the federal government should both increase investment in these efforts and require the strengthening of these programs to better serve all workers, employers, and taxpayers, including immigrants. *Recommendations include:* (1) Increase Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funding and ensure federal grants are flexible in allowing cities and states to invest in strategic partnerships with worker centers, unions, and non-profits that have built trust with workers and can provide intentional training and job placement support. (2) Reduce barriers to accessing the public workforce system for both workers and businesses by training counselors to better serve all populations and integrating legal and English language services into workforce navigation. (3) Encourage the inclusion of immigrant affairs experts on workforce development boards to support

and advance an understanding of issues impacting foreign-born residents. (4) Fill critical workforce needs; create mobility for workers; and support employee retention through skills building, credential evaluation support, bi-literacy certifications and other program approaches.

- **Legal Services and Access to Benefits:** At present, the complexity of the law, the limitation and expense in accessing legal services, and an overly bureaucratic process [jeopardize fairness or due process](#), resulting in delays and inefficiencies that prevent timely access to work authorization or family unification. Moreover, improving the process to obtain benefits requires bold changes to service design and delivery. *Recommendations include:* (1) Create matching federal grants for local communities to increase the use of the Department of Justice's Recognition and Accreditation program to expand navigation and legal capacity. (2) Reinstate and scale long-standing federal efforts to increase capacity and more effectively triage individual needs in deportation proceedings, such as hotlines, pro bono help desks, and legal orientation programs, particularly in communities that have limited legal capacity. (3) Invest in strategic programming, sometimes called panel programs, like those adopted by many state courts that certify and maintain a roster of attorneys who may be accessed for low-bono or government-funded programming. (4) Integrate legal service capacity within existing service delivery systems, like the American job centers, and create programs for Peace Corps returnees to serve in communities, where they can be trained and use their language capacity to deliver these services. (5) Focus on efforts to reduce barriers and time in application processes, such as: eliminating the need to separately apply for work authorization when a given status makes you eligible to work; focusing on technological advancements, like improving the online application infrastructure and effectively using tools like AI to support in translation of documents or application completion; and eliminating redundancies, such as collecting duplicative information, secondary biometrics requirements, or evidence across applications or benefits already collected by the agency.
- **Consumer Protection:** A system that preys on the most vulnerable isn't safe for anyone. For too long, efforts to address exploitative actors have been too minimal. These challenges occur in the unauthorized practice of immigration law through notarios, through abusive employers, or in discriminatory banking practices or other financial products. Further, [The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau](#) has found that even long-term residents encounter harmful practices that impede their ability to build credit, pursue home ownership, or advance business goals. A recommended approach to identifying fraudsters, holding bad actors accountable, and working to ensure fairness could include the creation of, and investment in, enforcement and a task force made up of local, state, and federal agencies would create opportunity for coordination around investigations, prosecutions, and policies or regulations to address these abuses and increase opportunity for financial stability.
- **Health and Education:** Economic data have repeatedly shown that immigration is a strong net positive for the United States. This positive impact includes individual tax contributions, consumerism, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Research, including from the Congressional Budget Office, also indicates that near-term impacts of newly-arrived individuals on locally-administered infrastructure can create challenges. Some economists have argued that these data do not account for the totality of immigrant contributions, such as corporate or sales tax, investments or multi-generation contributions. In addition to the above recommendations to support better integration and address delays in access to work authorization, the federal government could consider offsetting near-term impacts through funding delivered to existing federal education and healthcare grants that give discretion to local governance on how best to address needs across all communities. Some [proposals](#) offer creative approaches to determining where to increase these grants.

- **Create a State and local government-sponsored visa and path to lawful status.** When it comes to immigration policy, the most consequential driver of positive outcomes (ability to work, settle, and more) is legal immigration status. [Attaining that stability unlocks positive trajectories making it critical that immigrants are effectively able to access lawful pathways, which also meet broader national priorities.](#) Yet the existing law does not recognize a role for state and local authorities to lift up specific interests for individuals to obtain status. Conversely, in Canada and Australia, while the national government plays the ultimate and central role in the granting of immigration status, the subnational provinces have the ability to create pathways where certain shortages exist. In creating a state or local government visa process, certain principles would be important to consider: (1) Create an opt-in consultation process every couple of years between local and federal government partners to identify necessary interests through data and conversation that would in turn determine allocation of visas as well as eligibility based on labor workforce needs such as healthcare, construction, technology or others. (2) State, county, regional and local government actors have different interests and appetites for engagement, and the ability to participate in or receive visas through this pathway should be available to each level of government. (3) Local interests are incredibly strong to support people who have ties to communities, to maintain long-standing workers, or to connect students with local, durable opportunities when they graduate, thus this pathway should be available to people already in the community as well as those from abroad. (4) Fund the public workforce system to provide technical assistance and/or expand training programs for all workers to support navigation to a new employer for someone receiving a local, place-based visa. This would also strengthen employer engagement with the public workforce system and provide greater visibility into workplace abuses.

KEY PRINCIPLES

In developing, or in some cases elevating, the initial set of ideas for this Blueprint summary and through preliminary conversations with local leaders, former federal officials, and experts, a set of principles have taken shape that apply across the board and should be considered important to any adoption of specific recommendations or other approaches.

- 1. There is no one size that fits all.** Across states, counties, and cities, power structures, intergovernmental relationships, politics, and economic and labor needs vary greatly. So too does the existing infrastructure around immigrant affairs expertise, workforce, and legal services. This reality underscores the need to create visibility, access, and coordination across levels of government and also that the solutions need to be flexible.
- 2. Opt-in participation is preferred.** Models that empower local and state leaders to choose how they participate in the national immigration program are more likely to succeed. While many local leaders will elect to participate, many have challenging local and intra-state dynamics that may make participation feel untenable, particularly in the near term.
- 3. Every problem needs an end-to-end solution.** There are no short-cuts or easy answers. National government policy has a deep and lasting impact at the local level. An inability or unwillingness for policy-makers and government administrators to grapple with these impacts and understand how the federal policy solutions can be responsive to local interests and the people that use the systems will result in failed policy and implementation.

4. **Strengthening infrastructure in the overall system helps prepare for a time of emergency.** A crisis moment is not the place or time to build new processes, establish working relationships, go through bureaucratic contracting and budget negotiations, or engage in siloed decision making. In the end, it will be more costly if infrastructure is not invested in upfront. We need to have a functioning, coordinated system in the best of times so we can fly when we need to.

National Security and Regional Migration

Emily Mendrala

December 2025

OVERVIEW

Considering the importance of migration on the national and international stage, the U.S. government is poorly equipped to make good decisions and drive coherent policy implementation.

National Security leaders, many of whom cut their teeth on Europe or Asia policy issues, lack migration policy expertise. At the State Department, foreign policy decisionmakers have been reluctant to face the migration and immigration policy set head-on, preferring that the issues be owned entirely by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and/or concerned that immigration policy imperatives would run afoul of other foreign policy priorities. And some political leaders are hesitant to engage on the complex issue set, fearful of a misstep.

The result has been a divided decision-making structure that lacks an effective vision, empowered coordinator, and appropriate level and pace of interagency coordination. And, for U.S. national security policymaking (referring to the bureaucratic decision-making structures of the National Security Council), migration policy issues – some of the most consequential policy issues facing countries around the world – are not fully understood, have been de-prioritized, and/or were sidelined over the last several decades in Democratic and Republican administrations alike.

This Blueprint summary addresses both process and policy and has two separate but related goals: first, to build bridges between immigration and national security policy communities, and second, to foster productive U.S. engagement with countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Recommendations offered to national security leaders include:

- **Articulate an affirmative migration policy vision, and educate political leaders to increase their confidence in complex and high-stakes migration-related policy issues.** Discomfort – in addition to silence/ceding the narrative space, messaging fumbles, and policy missteps – creates a leadership vacuum among many key U.S. government policy actors.
- **Establish migration policy as a priority area for national security leaders and organizations.** Intentionally connect national security and immigration policy leaders to educate future national security leaders, which will lead to better policy decision-making. Connecting leaders from across immigration and national security policy communities – via convenings, travel, and joint projects – will foster buy-in for an affirmative migration agenda that takes into account international and domestic implications.

- **Employ State Department, Treasury, and Office of Management and Budget tools**, such as [diplomacy](#), consular modernization, innovative financing models, and creative budgetary tactics. Bring these agencies' policy experts more fully into the policymaking process, and leverage available tools to support implementation efforts.
- **Maintain momentum in the Americas**. Highlight bright spots and otherwise spur continued progress toward countries' stabilization and lawful pathways commitments – to lessen the effects of regional inertia on instability and migration demand.
- **Foster relationships between U.S. and Latin American policy leaders** to overcome regional distrust of the U.S. government following policy whiplash in recent decades.

BRIDGE TO NATIONAL SECURITY

Building stronger ties between the national security and immigration policy communities will improve the policymaking and implementation process. Fostering these ties will bring more U.S. government tools to the table from the Departments of State and Treasury, enhance policy effectiveness, and strengthen decision-making processes, adding depth and nuance to leaders' understanding of this complex policy set. For example, national security leaders should fully understand the consequential impacts migration policy can have on [local communities](#), local [economies](#), and domestic political dynamics. Learning should be a two-way street between these two policy communities. While this project focuses on equipping bureaucratically-powerful national security leaders to play a more effective role on immigration policy, national security leaders should also recognize the value in mutual learning with immigration policy leaders on national security priorities and processes. In the near term, immigration and national security policy communities could:

- Build stronger bridges between them by, for example, connecting immigration policy experts into the networks of national security organizations, having former senior officials encourage national security organizations to engage in immigration and migration-related programming, and having those same former officials make the case to funders to support programming housed in national security policy spaces.
- Target future national security leaders with education efforts on immigration policy. Identify and target future national security leaders from across the ideological spectrum for educational efforts, including writing, travel, briefings, and convenings. Be intentional about breaking down silos between migration and other national security conversations, such as climate, multilateral systems, and regional policy discussions.
- Articulate and vie for an affirmative vision for U.S. migration policy from the perspective of the national security community that is informed by immigration policy experts and is complementary to a domestically-focused immigration policy agenda.
- Immigration and national security leaders should, in turn, work to educate political leaders about this comprehensive, affirmative vision and associated policy options. Without a mandate from the top, policy leaders and bureaucratic structures will be hard-pressed to implement the vision and bring the necessary tools to bear to achieve policy objectives.

In government, there should be an empowered decision-maker at the helm, seamless cross-agency coordination, and a regular cadence of engagement that can increase as necessary in crisis situations.

Regardless of who chairs policy development or decisional meetings, both national security and immigration leaders would be around the table. National security leaders should have sufficient knowledge of and/or experience with the immigration policy context, feel ownership over the issues, and bring creativity and the full suite of national security tools to the table. This could be achieved through the following:

- Having an empowered decision-maker at the White House would help to coordinate the interagency toward effective and efficient implementation of the President's vision. This individual could occupy one of several roles to include the Deputy Chief of Staff (DCOS), the Domestic Policy Advisor, the National Security Advisor, or a coordinator/czar.
- Departments and agencies, including the Office of Management and Budget, should designate senior officials at a level no lower than the Deputy Secretary to coordinate the issue within their department; each of these officials should be supported by an advisor with deep expertise on immigration and/or migration.
- The Department of State should recognize its role in implementing a comprehensive policy approach, including policies related to [enforcement](#), stabilization, root causes, and [lawful pathways](#). The State Department should more fully embrace [migration management](#) as part of its mandate.
- The teams making personnel decisions at the start of a new administration should contemplate how to equip leadership on this consequential issue and to bridge likely interagency gaps. National security leadership positions – political and civil servants alike across relevant agencies – should be staffed with experts in immigration-related fields and, moreover, these officials should be equipped with individual and cross-agency training at federal training hubs and/or via the transition.

MAINTAIN MOMENTUM IN LATIN AMERICA

One of the many positive outcomes that could come from bridging the immigration and national security policy communities would be to strengthen the strategic contributions of the foreign policy community to a comprehensive migration policy approach, including regional expertise and diplomatic skills.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, events and policies factor hugely into U.S. migration policy success or failure. Today, U.S. policy leaders have a role to play in encouraging and equipping regional progress. Facing negative pressures from the Trump administration and a halt to international development aid support, countries in the region are disinclined or slow to continue implementing an affirmative regional migration policy, including efforts to address root causes of migration (e.g., climate change), to expand lawful pathways within the region, to encourage humane enforcement, and to continue to offer integration and stabilization support for migrants and refugees in the region.

However, some bright spots remain. In the near-term, U.S. policy leaders, including former government officials, practitioners, and thought leaders, should recognize and highlight best practices and promising pilots in Latin America and the Caribbean. Practitioners should test these pilots and vet them for scale. In the medium-term, policymakers can – in a fulsome way – bring U.S. foreign policy partnerships and tools to bear to address migration challenges. The time to spotlight bright spots in the region is now. The next year could offer time and space to consider a suite of innovative policies, including new financing models,

innovations in philanthropy, subnational diplomacy (engagement between local leaders), lawful pathways pilots, new protection systems, and screening and removal cooperation. We should also use the next three years to foster relationships between U.S. leaders and regional leaders to start to rebuild trust and lay the groundwork for cooperation.

Pathway to Better Serve Unaccompanied Children

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December 2025

VISION

The goal of this paper is to provide tangible and operational recommendations to improve how unaccompanied children are treated by the U.S. government. Ideally, the government would take steps to reduce the likelihood that families feel compelled to send children on the dangerous journey to the United States, but for those who do come, this paper recommends improvements to how these children are treated. The purpose is to inform a system in which:

- Children are cared for in a trauma-informed and culturally and linguistically-appropriate way.
- Sponsor vetting policies, processes, and technology ensure that children's safety and wellbeing are prioritized.
- The amount of time that children spend in government custody is as limited as possible, as it is a well-established child welfare principle that children should not be in government custody, especially congregate care, for longer than necessary.
- Children have access to legal protections so that they are not returned to harm and are not subjected to increased risk of exploitation due to their lack of immigration status.

BACKGROUND

Unaccompanied children (UC / children) are defined as those under the age of 18, without lawful immigration status, and without a parent or legal guardian to provide care and custody. The Homeland Security Act (HSA) of 2002, Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPR) of 2008, Flores Settlement Agreement (FSA) of 1997, UC Program Foundational Rule, and other laws, regulations, policies, and settlement agreements that govern responsibilities related to UC across the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS); the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Administration of Children and Families' (ACF) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR); and the Department of Justice's (DOJ) Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR).

KEY PILLARS

- 1. Immigration Policies that Impact UC:** Restrictive immigration policies can increase the risks of exploitation, trafficking or family separation for children in particular. However, when UC are exempted from immigration restrictions, some families may respond by sending children to the United States alone, understanding that children are more likely to be admitted if they arrive without a parent or legal guardian. Policies that allow families to seek protection together are best for children and families. In addition, the Central American Minors (CAM) program, which has allowed children to join parents and legal guardians lawfully present in the United States, could be expanded and improved to prevent children from taking the dangerous journey and entering government custody. CAM application processes could be simplified, more timely, and better resourced; eligibility could be expanded; and safe transport and housing could be provided to applicants while they are waiting in their country of origin, all of which would allow the CAM program to truly provide access to timely protection.
- 2. Initial Apprehension and Treatment in CBP Custody:** CBP is often the first point of contact for UC as they reach the U.S. border or a port of entry. [CBP's role](#) is critical in collecting accurate information, documenting family relationships, providing immediate stabilization services, such as access to food and appropriate facilities, and ensuring compliance with protections and settlement agreements while UC await transfer to ORR. Better data sharing between CBP and ORR can reduce unnecessary family separation and support appropriate placements and services. CBP could also create a process for verified parents to reunify with children directly from CBP custody, which includes appropriate vetting but does not require unnecessary transfers to ORR. Embedding ORR staff and child welfare professionals in CBP facilities would help identify sponsors earlier and shorten children's time in federal custody.
- 3. Treatment in ORR Custody, Types of Facilities, and Services Provided:** ORR provides care and custody for UC referred by a federal agency. ORR must ensure adequate bed capacity and the right types of facilities to serve children of different ages, genders, and needs, who have been and may be referred to its custody. Expanding all forms of foster care capacity, improving behavioral management tools, and creating a continuum-of-care model can ensure placements in the least restrictive settings. While in custody, UC must receive education, legal services, English classes, integration support, and access to child advocates in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways, with quality controls to ensure consistent delivery.
- 4. Legal Services and Immigration Court Processes:** Access to legal services is essential for UC, starting with in-person Know Your Rights presentations and screenings, as well as access to child advocates. The immigration court process could be streamlined, and backlogs reduced, if every child had an attorney to provide representation throughout the life of their case, and if affirmative relief could be decided by the federal government prior to any deportation proceedings. Dedicated UC courts, electronic form filings, and improved coordination between agencies would further increase efficiency. Before removal, all children must be screened for trafficking risks, and those deported must receive repatriation services to support safe returns. In addition, it is important for all sponsors to have timely access to DOJ's Legal Orientation Program for Custodians (LOPC).
- 5. Vetting Processes for Sponsors:** Sponsor vetting must be thorough and efficient, while avoiding bureaucratic delays that prolong government custody. Typically, about one-third of UC sponsors are parents, and more than 80 percent of UC sponsors are close family members. Across all administrations since the passage of the HSA and TVPRA, all sponsors have had to provide

identification, proof of relationship with the child or the child's family; submit to a DOJ public records check and sex offender registry check; and complete ORR's application and assessment processes. Technological improvements, access to other U.S. government systems, and quality controls are the most important tools that can help increase ORR's access to information critical for child safety, rather than layering duplicative checks. Granting ORR meaningful access to relevant databases of DHS, DOJ, the National Targeting Center, the National Vetting Center, and regional fusion centers, with appropriate usage restrictions and confidentiality and privacy protections, would improve access to information while providing sponsors with the opportunity to verify their identities through fingerprints, facial recognition, or other secure technologies, such as credit card verification. ORR policies must make clear that sponsors' information will not be shared for immigration enforcement purposes, and outreach through trusted community partners will be needed to build trust with potential sponsors, especially given that current policies have reduced the likelihood that families of UC feel safe to contact the government to reunite with their children.

- 6. Post-Release Services and Intersections with State and Local Child Welfare Agencies:** All follow-up from the federal government related to UC must be conducted by child welfare professionals, rather than by immigration or law enforcement officers. This is important because child welfare professionals understand how to talk to children without retraumatizing them, which is essential to eliciting full responses, identifying child safety concerns, and reporting incidents of trafficking or exploitation to law enforcement and child welfare agencies as appropriate. Post-release services (PRS) must be available to all UC, and providers must work closely with local organizations that have built trusting relationships with immigrant communities. A new ORR kinship program, modeled after state programs that provide caregivers with stipends similar to foster parents, could be created for sponsors who comply with ORR's Sponsor Care Agreement (SCA). When ORR reports safety concerns, law enforcement and child welfare agencies must provide a feedback loop so that ORR knows what action has been taken, which can inform sponsor vetting processes and service provision. Grants to state and local governments and local education agencies could be created to support follow-up actions related to ORR reporting, as well as English classes, psycho-social support, and assistance for UC transitioning to adulthood.

CONCLUSION

For decades, the U.S. government has struggled with the challenges related to providing care and custody for UC, releasing them to sponsors, and ensuring their access to due process and protection. A whole-of-government approach is needed to protect UC, who are vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking due to their lack of immigration status, being apart from their parents and family, and oftentimes prior history of trauma, abuse, neglect, and/or economic hardship.