Why advocate to your members of Congress?

As a constituent, you are an agent in the democratic system. You have a right to advocate, and your elected members need to hear from you. The relationship you build can influence the policy-maker’s decision. Congress oversees the work of the Department of Homeland security, including budgetary appropriations, and Congress can pass legislation to fix many of issues we raise below. Although the Executive Branch holds the responsibility for immigration policy enforcement, Congress holds the key to passing legislation that can override harmful enforcement decisions. They can make decisions that ensure people have access to due process, to safer ways of entering the country, and to pathways to citizenship. They can make decisions that ensure asylum seekers, individuals and families, are not detained, and that families are not separated. Ultimately, they hold the key to this process. Your voice matters!

Which Congressional Committees address issues related to immigration?

All representatives have a vote in immigration related legislation and should be visited. Members of some committees in the House of Representatives and the Senate have particular influence over matters of immigration. These members influence bills that come out of their committee to be discussed on the floor of each chamber and provide oversight of various departments that carry out work related to immigration and refugees. It is important to research to see if your elected official sits on one of these committees. This knowledge helps frame the conversation with those officials.

Committees:

House of Representatives – Judiciary (Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship), Homeland Security, Education and Labor, Appropriations

Senate – Judiciary (Subcommittee on Border Security and Immigration), Homeland Security and Government Affairs, Appropriations

2021 issues to raise to your members of Congress:

1. Family Incarceration, Family Separation and Asylum

The Obama Administration increased the use of family detention in 2014. Family incarceration is still used today though its use has been limited in court. To abide by the court ruling but still deter the entry of asylum-seeking families, in 2018 the Trump Administration began releasing children from immigration detention but continued to detain their parents, thereby separating families. This “zero-tolerance” policy was met with strong public outcry.

We have witnessed the end of some harmful practices. By executive order in February 2021, President Biden created a task force to assist with the reunification of families. The Department of Homeland Security terminated the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) program in June 2021. In February 2021, the State Department announced the termination of the asylum cooperative agreements that

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1. https://www.govtrack.us/congress/committees/
required asylum seekers to request asylum in northern Central American countries before coming to the United States.\textsuperscript{4}

However, harm continues. Hundreds of families are still separated, and families continue to be separated through policies that make asylum-based entry in the United States nearly impossible. Under policies like Title 42, a CDC policy,\textsuperscript{5} many adults are unable to enter the US to ask for asylum. Thus, families make the difficult decisions to send their children alone. Questions loom about whether the government has upheld the due process rights for parents and families, especially as expedited removals continue.\textsuperscript{6} The separation of families and the insistence on detaining asylum seekers shows a desire to deter asylum seekers from entering the U.S. at a time when so many need protection.\textsuperscript{7}

A nation’s asylum laws are only meaningful if they are honored in times of crisis. The U.S. is not honoring it’s promises to the world.

\textit{Ask your representatives for the following:}

- A plan for family reunification that honors due process rights and rights to family integrity for every parent.
- Oppose an expansion of and urge an end to family detention. Asylum-seeking families must have freedom to access due process, to find lawyers, and to prepare their cases as a family unit.
- Oppose the criminalization of immigration. Make enforcement officers honor asylum law, which allows those seeking protection to ask for asylum, regardless of entry or immigration status.\textsuperscript{8}
- Protect the asylum process. Do not place limitations on what is allowed under the Immigration and Nationality Act. Stop imposing wait times at ports of entry that serve to manufacture crisis, which in turn causes people to choose between homelessness and irregular entry into the U.S.
- Ask for the Fair Day in Court for Kids Act.\textsuperscript{9} Individuals seeking asylum only have access to an attorney if they can afford one. As a result, 80 percent of detained migrants go without a lawyer. This is true even though immigration proceedings affect a person’s liberty, family integrity, livelihood, and, in cases of asylum and torture, their very lives. The Fair Day in Court for Kids Act would provide a minor improvement by guaranteeing counsel for unaccompanied children, who currently go without representation as well.

\section*{2. Refugee Resettlement}

In early 2020, the resettlement cap was raised to 62,500.\textsuperscript{10} The increase is a welcome change so that families may be reunified and other vulnerable populations may be able to enter the United States.

\begin{itemize}
\item \url{https://www.dhs.gov/news/2021/07/26/dhs-statement-resumption-expedited-removal-certain-family-units}
\item \url{https://genesisofexodusfilm.com/thefilm/}
\item \url{https://www.uscis.gov/ilink/docView/SLB/HTML/SLB/0-0-0-1/0-0-0-29/0-0-0-1687.html}
\item \url{https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/115/s2468}
\item \url{https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/03/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-refugee-admissions/}
\end{itemize}
However, this renewed commitment to refugee resettlement is still well below the annual average of 95,000. During his campaign, President Biden stated he would raise the entry cap to 125,000. In light of increased numbers of refugees worldwide, refugee rights and humanitarian organizations are urging the administration to meet this goal.\(^{11}\) We must continue to ask our government to restore the nation’s humanitarian commitment to refugee resettlement.

**Ask your representatives for the following:**
- Urge Department of Homeland Security to prioritize the reunification of family members.
- Restore our commitment to refugees by increasing our commitment to 125,000.
- Ask that Congress maintain budgetary commitments for the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

### 3. Citizenship for All

The Presbyterian Church (USA) supports access to pathways to citizenship for undocumented populations in the United States. The 220\(^{th}\) General Assembly (2012) of the PCUSA urges faith and community leaders to advocate for legislation that provides “a reasonable and inclusive path for undocumented migrants presently living in the United States to eventually gain citizenship.”\(^{12}\) In January 2021, immigrant rights advocates renewed their calls for legislative reforms that open pathways to citizenship for undocumented individuals. Several legislative measures have passed the House of Representatives and other options are being explored in the Senate. As witnessed during the novel coronavirus pandemic, nearly 70% of undocumented persons in the labor force are considered essential workers.\(^ {13}\) Their contributions to family, community, and country are critical.

**Ask your representatives for the following:**
- Support “clean” bills that allow for the quickest and least cumbersome pathway to citizenship for all undocumented persons residing in the United States.
- Communities of color are excessively monitored by law enforcement leading to increased rates of arrest and incarceration. Urge Congressional officials to take this into consideration when establishing regulations about who can access pathways to citizenship.
- Legislative reforms should not tag on other conditions, like an increase in border militarization or immigration enforcement measures, which further add to the distress of all migrant populations in the U.S.

### 4. Appropriations – Interior and Exterior Enforcement

In a time when we have witnessed friends and family torn from our communities\(^ {14}\) and unspeakable harms visited to those only seeking safety at our borders, all in the name of enforcement and rule of law, it is time to question the current funding of these agencies—not to increase it.

**Ask your representatives for the following:**
- Do not increase the funding of Customs and Border Protection or Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Do not increase the numbers of officers, agents, walls, or detention beds.

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\(^{11}\) United Nations High Commission on Refugees statistical information - [https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/](https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/)


• Demand independent monitoring systems for both agencies and the private institutions with which they contract.
• Begin discussions about how to reform the mandate and focus of these agencies. Their blind enforcement and selective application of laws and rights have damaged families, communities, and economies in the interior and the borderlands of the U.S.