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LAW OFFICES

The House Strikes Back

By Ryan Stark Lilienthal

In an effort to derail any positive movement on comprehensive immigration reform, the U.S. House of Representatives has initiated an unusual effort to conduct nation-wide forums to garner support for an enforcement-only immigration law, precluding any opportunity for undocumented immigrants to legalize their status.

At best, this strategy is a delay tactic to ensure that no immigration law passes this year. At worst, it is a cynical attempt by the Republican leaders of the U.S. House of Representatives to convince U.S. citizens that immigration is bad for the United States; that all undocumented immigrants are criminals and should be deported; and that we should erect as many barriers to the United States as possible for future immigration.

Until now, immigrants and their advocates have urged our elected officials to support comprehensive immigration reform that provides a path to legalization and creates a temporary worker to enable immigrants to enter the country legally, while expanding due process rights of immigrants in the United States. With House of Representatives Republicans taking their case directly to the American people, immigrant advocates must meet the challenge by gaining support for comprehensive immigration reform, not just from elected officials, but from the American public, as well.

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The massive, pro-immigrant demonstrations throughout the country this spring demonstrated the will and potential political power of immigrant communities. But, it's not enough to simply show strength. Immigrants must convince U.S. citizens that comprehensive immigration reform is not only fair and just, but good for America and for U.S. citizens. This is a particularly positive message when compared to that of the House Republicans, which is about erecting borders, deporting individuals and creating a country based on distrust and fear.

To make their case, anti-immigrant advocates have recently inundated the U.S. Capitol with bricks. Apparently, most, or all, elected federal officials received a brick in the mail to symbolize the importance of legislation that focuses only on walls and enforcement. One clever and profound response proposed by some immigrant advocates is to send work gloves to our elected officials in Washington to represent the benefits that hard-working immigrants bring to the United States. In a larger sense, the gloves represent the idea of giving a hand. Immigrant advocates should make the contrast--between work gloves and bricks-- their central theme over the coming weeks. The pro-immigrant movement is about the glove -- giving a helping hand and lifting up America; the anti immigrant movement is about bricks -- weighing America down.

We must continue to think creatively about educating U.S. citizens regarding the positive impact immigrants bring to communities. The positive immigrant story must be one that is told and re-told in newspapers with letters to the editor and op-eds; in church, synagogue, mosque, and temple sermons; and repeated by elected officials who recognize that as a nation of immigrants, America is strengthened by the immigrants who come to this country.