

Dear Members of the United States Senate and House of Representatives,

The United Church of Christ works to offer an extravagant welcome to all of God's children regardless of their national origin or citizenship status. Many of our congregations are working to become Immigrant Welcoming Congregations because we understand we have a moral imperative to welcome the most vulnerable in our midst.

We urge all members of Congress to speak out in support of deferred action for families and pursue commonsense immigration reform. The United Church of Christ (UCC) has passed resolution after resolution, year after year at our General Synods in support of humane and compassionate immigration reform.¹ True immigration reform based on real solutions must create a pathway to citizenship for the estimated 11 million undocumented people living in the United States. Given the absence of congressional action, we ask you to support expanded Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA+) and the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA) that will provide relief from deportation and family separation for over 4 million people.

Tell the Administration to stop the raids and end Operation Border Guardian. The UCC has significantly invested in Central American asylum seekers to help them rebuild their lives in safety. We remain very disappointed by the Obama Administration's decision to plant fear throughout the immigrant community through the recent raids, starting January 2nd of this year, designed to send people back to the most dangerous countries in the world. These raids are an inhumane and unjust response to the humanitarian crisis that has caused thousands to flee the horrific realities of brutal violence and extreme poverty in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Instead of deporting families seeking safety, the Administration should see that they are provided adequate representation to seek asylum. We urge members of Congress to tell the Administration to stop the raids and end Operation Border Guardian that has targeted unaccompanied children for deportation and has left people in fear of being separated from their families.

We call on Congress to respect current U.S. asylum law, honor existing protections for victims of human trafficking, and expand legal assistance. We must ensure the right to due process for each individual; we cannot roll back protections outlined in the bi-partisan Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) of 2008 that would result in children being returned back into the hands of traffickers, gangs, and others who seek to exploit them. The 2008 TVPRA provides the lifesaving process to identify and protect unaccompanied children who are victims of trafficking or persecution.² This process is strong and should be expanded to cover unaccompanied children from Mexico, as well. We urge all members of Congress to support the "Fair Day in Court for Kids Act" (S. 2540/H.R. 4646) that will provide legal assistance to unaccompanied children to assist them in their asylum application processes. Special attention should be given to transgender asylum seekers, who are often fleeing violence on account of their gender identity and who should not be held in detention, where abuses against the transgender population are rampant while awaiting adjudication of their cases.

¹ Resolution Supporting Compassionate Comprehensive Immigration Reform and the Protection of the Human Rights of Immigrants, <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/g29-14.pdf>.

² William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 (TVPRA) § 235, <http://www.state.gov/j/tip/laws/113178.htm>.

Congress should tell the Administration to cease Operation Streamline and the prosecution of immigrants for unlawful entry or reentry.³ Congress should urge the Obama Administration to stop Border Patrol referrals to prosecute unlawful entry or reentry cases. Congress should also tell Attorney General Lynch to halt Operation Streamline because it is inhumane, ineffective, and a waste of taxpayer dollars. International courts have found it to be a violation of human rights and international law. The Office of Inspector General⁴ has found that there is no factual evidence to indicate that Operation Streamline is an effective deterrent; rather, it may be in violation of international treaties. This surge of prosecutions has led to over-criminalization and mass incarceration of migrant workers and even asylum seekers, which has cost taxpayers over \$5 billion in the last five years at a profit of \$90 million each year to the private prison industry.

All members of Congress should join together and put a stop to the bed quota. The United States has the largest immigrant detention infrastructure in the world with over 400,000 individuals passing through detention each year. The expansion of the system is in part due to an arbitrary quota from Congress that requires the incarceration of 34,000 immigrants in detention at any given time in private prison facilities.⁵ Sixty-two percent of immigration detention beds are operated by private prison companies. This policy, known as the “detention bed quota,” is unprecedented; no other law enforcement agency operates on a quota system. The detention bed quota creates a strong incentive to support and expand mass incarceration, at taxpayers’ expense, while private prison companies earn exorbitant profits at the expense of immigrants’ safety and their lives. We call on all members of Congress to eliminate the detention bed quota and end this perverse practice.

Congress should pressure Border Patrol to stop the excessive use of force to carry out their duties. There have been 50 killings from Border Patrol since 2010, and only one agent has been charged. The lack of accountability or effective training to stop excessive use of force by Border Patrol agents has led to an increase in the abuse of immigrants across the country. Recently, the Department of Homeland Security integrity advisory panel released a report, which highlighted the ways in which Border Patrol ignores or downplays abuses by agents and officers.⁶ Abuses range from shootings of unarmed people to the unnecessary escalation of force. U.S. Congress should pressure the Department of Homeland Security to increase effective use of force training, to improve transparency and access to information within Customs and Border Protection, and to ensure Border Patrol agents are held to account for the abuses they commit.

As the United Church of Christ and people of faith, we are committed to defending the rights and dignity of all people. We look to our elected officials to show moral leadership in welcoming the immigrant in our midst. Please consider these concerns as you develop real policy solutions that reform our broken and outdated immigration system.

³ 8 U.S.C. sec. 1325-26.

⁴ Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General, Streamline: Measuring Its Effect on Illegal Border Crossing, May 15, 2015, https://www.oig.dhs.gov/assets/Mgmt/2015/OIG_15-95_May15.pdf.

⁵ Public Law 114–4, Mar. 4, 2015, <https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ4/PLAW-114publ4.pdf>.

⁶ Brian Bennett, *Report finds little progress at curbing Border Patrol abuses*, The Los Angeles Times, Mar. 14, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-na-border-patrol-abuses-20160314-story.html>.

Sincerely,

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Reverend Luis Alvarenga, Comunidad del Buen Pastor

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