

Strangers No Longer 2024 Summer Education Series

Session One: June 20, 2024

Introduction

Judy Brooks

Good evening. My name is Judy Brooks, and I presently serve as the president of the board of directors of Strangers No Longer; and so, on behalf of the board of directors. I would like to tell you how grateful we are that so many of you have chosen to join us for the first of four webinars on understanding immigration.

If you are not familiar with the mission of Strangers No Longer, we have three components:

- Strangers No Longer provides direct service to migrant families in Michigan as they navigate their journeys of resettling.
- We also do advocacy work, attempting to change laws and policies that would make Michigan, hopefully, a more welcoming community.
- And thirdly, we have a mission to educate; and that is why we're here tonight.

It is our belief that in order to be effective advocates we must equip ourselves with as much knowledge and understanding as we can; and is our hope that these series of webinars - the first tonight on Personal Journeys and Common Sense Legislation that would make those journeys easier for our migrants.

The second, next month in July, talking about What's Really Happening at the Border; thirdly we want to talk about Immigrants and their Contributions to the Community which are often minimized, and sometimes discredited: and then, lastly, in our series, we want to reflect on Catholic Social Teaching and come to know what our obligation is to all of our fellow human beings as they journey through life, and try and make homes for themselves.

We hope that these webinars enrich and enlighten all the conversations we have with our neighbors, the voters, our conversations with the legislators as we meet over the summer in Lansing; as we meet and go together to Lansing in the fall, SNL plans to do that.

Again, that it boosts our energy as we celebrate Pope Francis as the Day of the Migrant on September the 29th at the Cathedral; and lastly, we hope that all of our efforts lead to the passage of the safe drive bills which would allow our immigrant families to apply for driver's licenses and state IDs in the state of Michigan. This was the number one issue that our Strangers No Longer immigrant members deemed as necessary to help them as they try to establish themselves as contributing members of the community.

For the past two years Strangers No Longer worked tirelessly to get these bills passed through the House and Senate in Michigan. Presently we are hoping to get them on the docket of the lame duck session, and hopefully passed by the end of this year.

So, may tonight be one step closer to help us on our journey to be the best friends, the best Advocates and the best Partners to our immigrant neighbors that we can be. So, thank you again for joining us.

Victoria Kovari: Thank you, Judy. We really appreciate those words; and I hope people get as much out of this webinar as we got out of just planning the whole series. So, we're excited by the response. What we're going to do is, we're going to go right to our video then of our current Congresswoman, Elissa Slotkin, who spoke very passionately on the Senate floor earlier this year about immigration, and her commitment to it. At the time the administration had put forward an immigration bill that received large bipartisan support; and, as we know, from all the accounts, the bill was not able to be voted on through a bunch of political maneuvering.

So, we thought we'd frame this with Bennett Abrams talk; and I'll introduce Ben in a minute, following the video with this piece from Congresswoman Elissa Slotkin.

Elissa Slotkin

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to be recognized for five minutes

Gentle woman is recognized.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Now that we're back in Washington and starting some very serious conversations, I wanted to make clear where I stand on an issue that I think most Americans, certainly most members of Congress, believe is of urgent importance; and that's on the issue of immigration. Immigration is now part of a larger negotiation that's going on, largely in the Senate. In addition to funding things like, Ukraine, the Middle East conflict, supporting Taiwan, it's all in the mix. The truth be told, since becoming a member of Congress, I have never seen an issue more politicized than the issue of immigration. I think most of us, regardless of party, would agree that our immigration system is broken. It is not working for anyone; not the community, struggling to handle thousands of migrants; not our own economy, where we actually really need immigration; not the migrants themselves, who are walking in some cases a thousand miles with their children to get to our border.

Both Democrats and Republicans share blame on the situation. We have had chances to reform this totally broken system in the past, but we have fallen short over and over again, It does not have to be this way! I think as rational, practical people, we should be able to come together and have a conversation about how we think this most

American of issues should go; and as we do, we should follow what I consider the five core pillars to address this comprehensive crisis.

Number one: immigration in the United States should be based on the needs of the US economy; and the employers in the United States right now, every single employer that I know is looking for legal labor; and our economy can take new people coming into the workforce. We should key our immigration numbers to the economy - immigration numbers, visa numbers - are set by congress, not by the White House, but by this body that I sit in, So, if we want to raise the caps of legally allowed visas in the United States, that is on this body,

Number two: we have to change the system so that immigrants can come to this country by applying from their home countries. Have it be faster to get a legal work permit from your home country, rather than walking, as I said, a thousand miles, making this dangerous journey to the border, paying a whole bunch of unsavory people to get themselves over. This is how it works on the northern border. I'm from Michigan; you don't have border agents making decisions about whether someone gets to come into our country or not. They are checking the visas and the paperwork, stamping approved or unapproved, and moving them through.

Number three: we need to invest in border security. Every country in the world deserves to know who's coming inside their borders. I'm a national security person. I spent my entire life trying to make sure to protect our homeland. Every country has the right to know who's coming in. We need strong border security. And there are plenty of bipartisan proposals, including ones that I have presented, that can accomplish this.

Number four: We have to address the root causes of migration. Why are people risking their life to come to this country in the first place? It's poverty; it's violence back home. We've got to help those countries improve their situation, so we don't have such a flood of people feeling desperate to come to the United States. That's in their interest, in ours.

And lastly: We need to live up to our values and morals as a country of immigrants, as is a nation of immigrants. I'm guessing everyone in this room right now owes their lives in America to an immigration story; and we always should remain a place where people, first fearing persecution and death, can come to at a chance to live,

I am willing to talk with anyone, Democrat or Republican, who wants to uphold common sense conversations. I'm willing to make progress, even if it's not popular, even if plans are imperfect; and the truth is, there's a lot of bipartisan ideas out there. They're just not sexy; they just don't get attention. I'm the co-sponsor of something called the dignity act. It's a comprehensive reform plan. It's bipartisan. It was put together by folks in the problem solvers caucus. But to be honest about those future negotiations, we have to be honest that our immigration system is broken because of that partisanship, because all sides, members of the House, the Senate, and the White House pointing fingers at everybody else, there is a way out of this mess. It's the same thing our constituents do

every day they go to work. They have negotiation. Not everyone is happy, but they come up with a compromise.

As we kick off 2024 we know that this issue of immigration is on the top of all of our news, feeds it's being, discussed in the Senate right now. I'm willing to work with anyone who is actually focused on getting something done.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I yield.

Gentlewoman yields.

Victoria Kovari: I would thank Congresswoman Slotkin for that. I thought that was an excellent speech on the House floor.

This time we are very happy to have Bennett Abrams with us tonight. Bennett is a legislative assistant with Congresswoman Elissa Slotkin; and he has worked for the congresswoman for, I think, about two and a half years. Now, immigration is one of his policy areas, along with a bunch of others; but he will specifically, obviously, talk about immigration. And we know that many things have happened, especially in the last couple of weeks, and today as well, as the announcement that came down about a week ago. So, Bennett will also be talking about that. So, I know that there will be questions on those two things.

What I know of Bennett, he grew up in the greater Baltimore area - is that right? and was a proud graduate of Tulane University. So, we're very happy to have you here, Bennett. So, take it away.

Bennett Abrams: Sure. Thank you for that introduction. As she said, my name is Bennett I help cover immigration policy for the congresswoman. I'm based in DC, out of her DC office, and handle, like she said, a variety of issues; but immigration, certainly one of the most consistent ones these days, so, you know, I think I think the congresswoman's speech sort of speaks for itself; but I can certainly just elaborate a little bit. But think you know, from her perspective, the system, you know, has just been extremely broken for a while; and I think that's obviously demonstrated by Laura's story: just the stakes that people go through just to get here in the first place. I think is indicative of the fact that, you know, what everyone would hope would be a sort of orderly and legal process has just sort of completely broken down over however many decades but I think for the congresswoman you know always interested in a serious conversation about, you know, both bipartisan, but also comprehensive immigration reform, because there are some, you know, piece- mail things here and there that you can do to make it a more just and efficient system. As, I think, you're seeing the president attempt to do but the only sort of long-term solution to this issue is something comprehensive in Congress, which really struggles with this issue; but, I think, just to reiterate the congresswoman's point, I think there's, you know, for her there's five key pieces of this discussion. I think, as she started with keying our immigration system to our economy we talked to a whole variety of Industries around the state about not only their struggle with finding labor, but their

struggle with navigating the US immigration system once they have found labor, you know. So, for example, Mao Island up top, they utilize a lot of temporary and seasonal labor to be able to open during their season in the summer; and they utilize most of that labor comes from outside the United States, you know, a lot in the northern triangle area; and every year, because of how few available visas there are, they just are desperate more and more for labor; and they're consistently competing with more employers each year for the same amount of visas. And it's becoming quite untenable, you know.

I think the second one the congresswoman addressed is, you know, the need to expand legal immigration pathways um you know I I think as Laura Story demonstrates that is the journey that that many people are forced to go through, because we don't have a system of pathways that connects people who want to come to the United States with the ability to actually come here. So, whether that's work visa programs, you know. I think for the congresswoman certainly, processing centers in those countries of origin we want to have a stronger United States presence in Central and South America with better connections to the communities and to the legal pathways that exist to them; and then, of course, she does say it's about investing in border security there. There does need to be a system at the southern border to ensure, not just that we know who and what is coming in obviously. There's a significant amount of trade there as well; but also to create humane conditions in a dignified situation down there. I think that's part of why you're seeing one of the executive orders is just the sort of lack of orderly processing that that has occurred down at the southern border with the amount of numbers um and briefly through, the other two, obviously addressing the root causes of displacement, where there needs to be more investment just in general in the global South, and certainly in Latin America, to start getting a handle on some of these situations that are causing people to come here in the first place; and then, obviously, above all else, living up to our nation's values and morals. It's as she said, we are a nation of immigrants; it's within our interest and everyone's to treat people with dignity and respect.

So, that's just sort of how the congresswoman thinks about things; and I can certainly preemptively briefly addressed, I think, the two sort of executive actions we saw from the president and the past couple of weeks. I think the you know, and I certainly speak for myself here not the congresswoman, but I think the president feels a need with the collapse of the Senate negotiation that our host, Victoria, spoke to earlier, I think the president feels the need to try and do what's in his power, with the ultimate understanding that it's up to Congress to provide the comprehensive fix; and I think what you're seeing the president do in these piece meal approaches; and when you do piece meal approaches,, certain people are going to agree more with one approach and certain people are going to disagree with that approach. That's just how it's going to go as opposed to that's why something comprehensive is sort of by definition a compromise; but the first thing the president did a couple weeks ago was make it certainly more difficult to claim asylum at the border. He's raising the standard that migrants have to reach in order to demonstrate that credible fear; but it only kicks in at a certain amount. Sc, it's only an effect when the average number of crossers is above

2500 in a single day, and goes away when that average goes back down to 1,500. And I think that's a product that Congress continually underfunds. What we actually need to have a humane system at the border; and that is border agents themselves, but also judges and people who handle the immigration court; because, what's happening is, we continue to add asylum cases to the backlog, but we do nothing to actually make it easier to clear that backlog. So, you're seeing a real backup in terms of processing at the border; and it's just not sustainable. And it's not something we can handle in a humane way.

And then, I think, today, it's obviously timely we're having this conversation the president addressing actions to basically allow for noncitizen spouse to stay in the US while seeking lawful permanent resident status. Previously, in theory, you're supposed to wait outside of the US and your country of origin before achieving uh long-term permanent resident status or LPR. This should impact probably around 500,000 people, and what's known as mixed status families; and these are a lot of these are migrants who are, quite literally, married to a US citizen. I think a lot of people don't understand; they've heard of green card marriages, They don't quite understand, it's not as simple as just signing a marriage license and you're treated like a citizen. It's much more complicated. But they have to live in the shadows in many ways and are sort of silenced by their status; and so, this is a really positive step in terms of keeping families together. So, you know two sides of the issue. I think in the president's two most recent orders - and it's really because Congress can't do its job in a comprehensive way.

So, I think I will stop there in terms of presentations; and, obviously, once we get to questions, I'm certainly happy to elaborate or answer anything and I'll turn it back, okay?

Victoria Kovari. Thank you. So, we have lots of time for questions; and I think it's appropriate, given how fluid the situation is right now in terms of immigration policy. So, I guess the first question is to Bennett. Is there any hope for bipartisanship, given the election or even post-election on some common sense immigration policy, such as the items that the congresswoman outlined in her video?

Bennett Abrams: I think it's a fair question. I think the pessimists and me would probably say it's extremely unlikely in terms of being an honest broker here. It's just an extremely difficult issue and with the split the divided Congress there just does not seem to be that agreement on something that can sort of thread the needle. A lot of us thought it might be what was negotiated in the Senate, which was candidly much more border security focus than it was comprehensive immigration reform. It got at some of those issues but by no means was extremely comprehensive in that regard. There just doesn't seem to be that agreement, I think I won't speak in political terms but I think plenty of people are waiting to see how the presidential election shakes out, just because that will shift the trajectory on immigration policy so significantly, most likely. So, you never say never.

And I think there are good minds working on the issue. Whether or not it passes, I think, is a much lower likelihood; and I think would really depend on agreement between the two sides on what it would look like; and, I think, we're just not there at the current moment.

Victoria Kovari. Okay, just one more follow-up question to that; and then, we'll get to a couple of questions for Laura. One is the five pillars that she outlined in her speech. And she also mentioned the dignity act. I know we have to wait until after the election; but what is your sense about how much support that has in Congress, just assuming that the current administration stays the same. How much support does the kinds of those five pillars that she outlined, how much would they have, or how much support do they have in Congress right now?

Bennett Abrams. So, yeah, I think those ideas are pretty significant bipartisan support. I mean, the dignity act, for example, has 37 co-sponsors, at least eight of which are Republicans. So, I think the ideas themselves can clearly get bipartisan support and it just is this is something that's quite at the leadership level. It requires leadership that's interested in finding those solutions. So, I think the Dignity Act is a popular bill. Is it perfect for every single party interested in the issue? Of course not; because, I think, by definition, something that comprehensive is going to have things that some people like and things that they don't like. That's what a product of negotiation typically looks like. So, I think there is some pretty strong bipartisan support on the ideas. It's about finding the package that threads that needle and leadership that's willing to buy in and get serious about finding what that solution is, okay?

Victoria Kovari. There's a question regarding the video. How do those who oppose immigrants coming to the U.S., even temporarily, just to get a work permit, like farm workers and such, how do they justify their opposition, when there's clearly a need as she outlined in terms of our economy for workers like this?

Bennett Abrams. Sure, I think there's sort of two similar but different answers. I think, on the one hand, some people oppose those sorts of programs, because, candidly, they think that certain industries have taken advantage of, candidly, what they would call cheap foreign labor. They think it undercuts American workers. That answer is less common these days than it used to be. I think, just given the labor demand that we have in this country in a way we didn't quite have before; but that that is still certainly a business case that some would make against those sorts of programs, not that I not what I necessarily agree with; but that they exist; and then, I think, on the other hand, you have people who are thinking less about business or anything. It's their sole focus is specifically on how people came here; and I think they have some emotional ideology that you should not come here illegally; and that sort of invalidates whatever overarching reason or motivation might have existed that led you to this country. So, I think most of those people would typically say, "I support immigration, but only legally." It sounds nice in practice of course but you look at stories like Lara's, where you're nowadays you're paying \$24,000. I mean, if you really think about that \$24,000, to someone you don't know or trust, to smuggle you across the border. That is not

something you do, that if there's a achievable legal pathway that's made available to you. So, I think that misunderstands the situation a little bit from our perspective; but there's just certainly quite an opinion that you should use a legal pathway; or otherwise, you shouldn't follow up to that, if there is such a strong business case. And many of us claim that, including the congresswoman, that there is a strong business case. Then why haven't the Chambers of Commerce and other corporations that are most impacted by the lack of workers, why haven't they stepped up to the plate in terms of supporting immigration policy, saying immigration policy, why AR, why aren't their voices stronger? Sure, I mean, I can't speak for them; but I would say they are certainly starting to make a louder splash. I think, for example, one of the pieces of legislation that the congresswoman has introduced is, it does, candidly, exactly one of what she says: it ties our H-2B^{1/} visa program this is the program that I was talking about earlier, that, for example, really relies on its temporary seasonal foreign labor. It ties it to the number of approved positions by the Department of Labor. Basically, very briefly, the way the process works is, if you're a company, like a landscaping company, first you have to look for an American worker; and once you certify with the Department of Labor that there isn't a domestic worker that exists, so, therefore, you're not competing unfairly with Americans, which is sort of the statute of the program, you're then eligible to apply for a visa for a foreign worker. The problem is the amount of approved positions far out exceeds the amount of actual available visas that exist. So, what you have is 200,000 needed jobs competing for 125,000 visas. So, it means some people end up without their workers and her bill would tie those two numbers: the amount of visas to the amount of positions; and it garnered support from the Detroit Chamber of Commerce. Some of the national level organizations that the US Chamber of Commerce takes part in like the National H-2B^{1/} Coalition, in part, because. I think. to your question, they are starting to see the value of immigration in terms of the business case; and because the labor demands are so acute in certain industries, construction, for example, part of -I'm not the expert here - but part of the reason we have such a shortage of available housing is because we have a shortage of people to build the houses in the first place. a lot of those Industries also rely on immigrant labor. So, I think, you're seeing more from the business community. Immigration is a sensitive one for a lot of people, regardless of the industry they're in. So, it's not always the easiest issue to come to a succinct position on; but, I think, you're starting to more.

Victoria Kovari. Okay, just one more question; then we're going to finish it off with a couple of questions for Laura, beyond the IM, beyond the economic reasons, for immigration, which she very eloquently addressed the issue of family unity, which today's announcement by the president seems to try to address some of that. But for families, like Lara, and that in terms of family unity, what proposals or what policy initiatives do you think, and by your relationship with the congresswoman, what kind of policy proposals could be put forward to encourage more family unity as part of the immigration package?

Bennett Abrams, Sure. I think that's something the congresswoman would obviously put under the principle of upholding our nation's values and morals. I think it's fair to say that that family unification is part of those values,. Sand more values and morals. So I

think, to the extent that her framework incorporates those kinds of questions, I would argue, it certainly does under that sort of principle in terms of some of the policies themselves a lot of what the president got at with his announcement. The congresswoman is a co-sponsor on legislation that would also put that into legislative statute and remove the need for presidential proclamation. On that it would be something set by Congress. So, those things that the president can do, whether it's with non-immigrant spouses or with dreamers, that can also be done by Congress; and I think from our opinion, probably should be done by Congress, since we are the lawmaking body; and, I think, those policies, pathway to citizenship for dreamers, family unification, there are a variety of bills out there that address those, of which we are co-sponsor on many. So, they're out there it's just about seeing, pulling together that package that satisfies everyone and gets the votes that's obviously escaped Congress for a while; but um you I think those policies are out there. Some can be done by you know both the president or congress some really can only be done by Congress so I think that's what I'd say on that. All right?

Victoria Kovari. And I know there's another. if you wanted to check the chat box. There's a couple of other questions regarding coyotes, being a form of human trafficking, and what measures. Can there any stop gap or immediate measures that could address that? And I think you did talk about beefing up the U.S presence in countries where we where we are finding a lot of immigrants coming from in Central America, and some of our own policies being responsible for the instability of those countries; and people fleeing from them. So. if you would, check the chat for those.

So, we're gonna now just try to look at what are our next steps and in terms of just what all this this first series meant. We really wanted to give people a sense of where we're at on immigration at this moment in our history; and because immigration is such a an important issue, a volatile issue, affecting the outcome of the elections, we know that it's important that people not just be content with what they hear on the news or they listen to on a blog, or whatever people's news source is, but to hear the stories of people who actually have taken the risk. And you heard what a huge gamble and sacrifice it was to come here to this country. And so, we wanted to be able to have you hear that, so that again, that you can spread the word, and you can have other people, whether it's in your parish or another group that you have, being able to have other folks hear those stories as well; and that you understand what the reality is politically, in terms of what Congress can do, what the president has done.

I would just like to just summarize the last two pieces of the executive orders that have come down. The first one being the shutting down the border to new asylum seekers. Number one: this is not a permanent action. It's driven by the number exceeding 2200 or 2500 threshold; and that policy has been in place for a long time. The president made it specific, obviously, to um asylum seekers. So, that is shut down until the numbers come down. Now they do have exceptions for humanitarian exceptions; and those that are included in by border agreements, and unaccompanied children, and victims of human trafficking, those are all exceptions to the ban on new asylum cases, the announcement that was made today.

Just to clarify and summarize what we're talking about is, the non-citizens spouses of U.S. citizens, i.e., who have been married as of June 17th, today, and have resided in the U.S. for 10 years or more, and are legally married to a U.S. citizen, they would be eligible for this particular pathway of legal permanent residents. They, the spouse, the U.S. citizen spouses, stepchildren, or their stepchildren, i.e., those children that may have been a part of her spouse's children, that are not U.S. citizens, are also included in this particular order. As for legal permanent residents, there's about 50,000 of those. So, all in all, there's over a half a million people that this impacts; and many more of their extended families, etc. The other thing to remember is, there is a three-year window to apply for permanent residency; and this is going to be done on a case-by-case basis. They are staffing up um the Department of Homeland Security staff; and in terms of trying to handle these cases; but that is what this particular order that was issued today deals with.

So, I'm sure we'll be hearing more about this at next month's webinar; and when we have Dylan Corbett talking about it. So, um I would like Kathy Faba just to say a little bit about the next event; and that's going to be held in July. Kathy.

Kathy Faba. So, we would like to invite all of you to our next program. It'll be on Zoom as well on Tuesday, July 16th at 7 PM. We will be welcoming Dylan Corbett, who's the executive director of Hope Border Institute in El Paso, Texas. Our education team at Strangers No Longer, we just felt we needed an authoritative account of what is actually happening day to day at the border from someone who lives there, and actually works with the migrants. So, that's why we've invited Dylan Corbett in Hope Border Institute. They have created a program of research policy work leadership development and action on behalf of migrants. They are on the ground to assess needs and provide assistance; and they bring together faith leaders and experts to develop long-term responses. So, that's on July 16.

And then, on Tuesday, August 20th, we will have the University of Pennsylvania, Professor Zeke Hernandez. He'll be talking about his new book which is called, "The Truth about Immigration; Why Successful Societies Welcome Newcomers." He combines personal stories with rigorous research, to offer a look at how newcomers affect local communities and our nation.

And then, our last program this summer will be on Tuesday, September 17th. With the election season coming up we will have our chaplain, Father David Buersmeyer with us to discuss "Catholic Social Teaching and Our Responsibility as Citizens." So, you'll be receiving emails about this and our next programs and information, and how you can register. And I hope you'll be able to join us.

Victoria Kovari. Thank you, Kathy. Just before we go, a couple of other details the advocacy committee at Strangers No Longer has been fighting for the restoration of driver's licenses for non-citizens; and as was indicated by Judy, we are continuing that fight; but as tonight indicated as well, there's a whole other advocacy effort that is

is sort of waiting for us to be involved in on the federal level, especially post-election. There may be room for us to put some pressure on our Congress people and Senators to pass some further meaningful common Sense immigration reforms. So, that may be one of the things that we decided to take on but, there is a potential of a lot of important advocacy on the federal level to push for some of either additional executive orders of Congress; but Congress really needs to act. And there seems to be some bipartisan support for some of these policies that we've discussed tonight.

And so, I would encourage you, if you are interested in being a part of the advocacy team, to contact Rich Faba. I think most of you might have his email address. We will put Rich and Kathy Faba's email address in the chat box. So, if you are interested in joining the advocacy team, and not a part of it so far, please send them an email, and they'll be able to let you know what's in store.

So, with that, we again thank the nearly 90 people who have joined us tonight, which is a wonderful turnout; and we hope that you'll join us for next month and the following sessions through September. So again, check out the chat box before you exit the zoom. And if you're interested in the advocacy work. And have a great night; and we'll see you next month.

Transcribed by

Tom Kyle

20240812

1/ The H-2B program allows U.S. employers or agents bring foreign nationals to the U.S. for temporary nonagricultural jobs