

Excerpt from Transcript of President Barack Obama's Remarks on Comprehensive Immigration Reform

New Orleans Town Hall Meeting October 15, 2009

QUESTION:

My question is, there's a lot of cases that have been -- mothers losing their children because of immigration. And the -- the kids are lost in the system. I don't think that's fair. I know, you know, immigration is illegal, but we have to keep the families together.

What is going to happen?

OBAMA:

Well, the -- first of all, you're right that this is heartbreaking. The way to solve it is to solve our immigration problem more broadly.

In the short term -- Janet Napolitano's also in charge of immigration. She's got a lot of stuff on her plate, by the way. Give Janet Napolitano a big round of applause.

(APPLAUSE)

She's worked hard.

(APPLAUSE)

You know, in the short term, what we're trying to do is to apply our immigration laws in a humane way that recognizes you don't want to just snatch a child from a mother, if the child's a U.S. citizen, even if the mother may not be.

It's a very complicated problem, but the way, sometimes, this has been administered, I don't think any of us would feel good about, in terms of reflecting American values. All right? You've got a small child that suddenly get sent into some foster care system and the mother is sent away.

So we've got to -- we've got to deal with that short-term issue.

The long-term problem, though, is the fact that we are a nation of laws and we are a nation of immigrants. So we believe in immigration. The vast majority of folks here, you all came from some place else. And, you know, I don't have a lot of sympathy to folks who suddenly, once they're in, don't want anybody else to come in. That's doesn't make sense to me.

**Partial Excerpt from Transcript of New Orleans Town Hall Meeting (continued)
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(APPLAUSE)

But -- but we're also a nation of laws. And that means that, when there are people in Mexico City waiting in line and paying their fees and doing everything right, and they are having to wait for years and then other folks are coming in without waiting in line, that's not fair.

(APPLAUSE)

And it's not -- it's not fair to them, and it's also putting enormous burden on, for example, our borders. And it's often unsafe. A lot of people die at those borders, trying to cross them.

So what we're trying to do is to create a mechanism for comprehensive immigration reform that would have some basic principles. Number one, we would strengthen the borders. That has to be done.

Number two, we would be serious about going after employers who are purposely hiring undocumented workers because they don't want to pay them minimum wage or they don't want to pay them overtime or what have you.

(APPLAUSE)

You know, everybody talks -- you know, you have these raids where they go in and they grab some undocumented workers. Yes, they broke the law, but, you know, they're just trying to feed their families. Go after these big companies that are purposely hiring those folks because they're the ones who were actually taking advantage of the system.

(APPLAUSE)

OBAMA:

So that's the second thing.

The third thing, then, is we've got to figure out -- we've got several million. It's estimated, let's say, somewhere between 10 million and 15 million undocumented workers who live here, and they've been here for a long time, and many of them have children here who are going to schools and they're now U.S. citizens.

And what I've said is, the notion that somehow you're going to send all those folks back, you're going to line up a whole bunch of buses -- and by the way, they're not all from Mexico. They're from Ireland. They're from Poland. They're from Ghana.

(APPLAUSE)

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Because that's another stereotype, I think, that often gets promulgated. So -- now, they have broken the law, so what I've said is let's -- let's acknowledge they've broke n the law. They've got to pay a fine. They've got to learn English. They've got to jump through a whole bunch of hoops, pay back taxes. But let's give them a pathway whereby they can get right, they can get legal, and then -- and then that way we will not have these kinds of situations where families are potentially being pulled apart.

But if -- you've got to combine the two things. You know, sometimes there are those on the left who want immigration reform, but they don't want to acknowledge the fact that we've got to strengt hen our borders. And you can't just do o ne without the other.

On the other hand, there are some folks who just say just crack do wn on the borders, but they pretend like somehow we're going to send back 12 million people, and we're not. So let's, you know, just get serious about this and solve the problem, and I think that we've got an opportunity to solve it in the next year or two.

All right? Thank you very much.

(APPLAUSE)