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The Dignity Act of 2023

What is the Dignity Act of 2023?

The Dignity for Immigrants while Guarding our Nation to Ignite and Deliver the American Dream Act of 2023, or “DIGNIDAD (Dignity) Act of 2023”, is an expansive, bipartisan immigration reform bill introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives by Representatives Maria Salazar (R-FL-25) and Veronica Escobar (D-TX-16). The Dignity Act is a bill that aims to enhance security at the U.S.-Mexico border, provide a solution for the millions of individuals currently living undocumented in the United States without viable options to regularize their legal immigration status, protect American businesses, and grow the U.S. economy.

How does the Dignity Act propose providing a pathway to lawful status to undocumented individuals in the United States?

The bill would create and offer two distinct options for acquiring status: Dignity Status and the Redemption Program. To be eligible for either form of status, each applicant would need to complete what is known as the “Dignity Program.” The Dignity Program created through the bill offers a seven-year deferred action on removal and provides employment and travel authorization to eligible applicants. To be eligible for the Dignity Program, an applicant must provide evidence that he or she has been continually physically present in the United States for at least five years prior to the enactment of the legislation and that he or she is not inadmissible under section 212(a) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, pay a fine of at least \$1,000, and pass a criminal background check.

Once approved for the program, participants must remain employed for four years or enrolled in a course of study, pay applicable and outstanding tax obligations, enroll in health coverage, and pay a total restitution amount of \$5,000 over the seven-year duration of the program. However, under the program, participants are barred from availing themselves of any federal means-tested benefits or entitlement programs.

Once someone has successfully completed the Dignity Program, a participant would need to decide between Dignity Status or the Redemption Program:

Dignity Status: Those who successfully complete the Dignity Program can immediately apply for a five-year Dignity Status, which provides lawful status in the United States, and employment and travel authorization. This form of status can be renewed indefinitely, so long as the individual remains in good standing with the law. An individual who opts for Dignity Status is not eligible for citizenship and remains ineligible for federal means-tested benefits or entitlement programs.

Redemption Program: The Redemption Program is completely optional and offers a five-year conditional status with employment and travel authorization. The individual is then authorized to apply for lawful permanent residency. There is an added restitution fee of \$5,000, as well as a 200-hour community service component. In addition, under the Redemption program, an applicant must learn English and U.S. civics.

Does the Dignity Act include any provisions for Dreamers?

Yes. Under the Dignity Act, Dreamers and recipients of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) would be eligible for conditional permanent resident status if they are able to meet certain requirements. These requirements include continuous physical presence for three years since the date of the legislation's enactment, arriving in the United States prior to being 18-years-old; obtaining a high school diploma (or approved equivalent, such as a General Education Development (GED) credential) or enrolling in a secondary school. In addition, applicants may be required to pay a \$425 fee. Recipients of DACA are able to undergo a streamlined process that requires undergoing a criminal background check and registering for the military Selective Service program. To remove the conditional basis of their status, and adjust to full permanent legal resident status, applicants must complete a degree of higher education, serve at least three years in the military, or be employed for at least four years.

What changes would the Dignity Act of 2023 make to our current immigration system?

In addition to the creation of pathways to status for undocumented individuals already in the United States, the bill also proposes changes to other areas of immigration law, including asylum, Temporary Protected Status (TPS), employment visas, and more. For instance, the bill proposes the adjudication of asylum claims within 60 days—during this time, individuals and families would stay in one of five “Humanitarian Campuses” near the border until there is a decision in their case. In addition, it would establish five processing centers in Latin America where individuals could be screened and processed. In addition, the bill would also create a path to citizenship for eligible TPS recipients. Further, the bill proposes reducing the visa backlog to a maximum of ten years, making an individual who has been waiting in the backlog for over ten years able to receive his or her visa and also doubles the per-country cap from 7% to 15% in order to reduce and eventually eliminate visa backlogs.

The Dignity Act also proposes changes to certain employment visa categories, such as the H-2A Agricultural Guest Worker Program, by removing the “seasonal” requirements to eligibility and removing visa caps on the category, as well as providing pathways to lawful status for undocumented agricultural workers, based on the program laid out in the Farm Workforce Modernization Act. The Dignity Act would also make the E-Verify program mandatory nationwide, increasing civil and criminal penalties for systemic violations; the E-Verify component would be phased in for different employer types, with employers of agricultural workers having up to 30 months to comply with the provisions of the law after it's enacted.

With respect to unaccompanied children, the bill would also codify the *Flores* Settlement Agreement.

How does the Dignity Act propose further securing the U.S.-Mexico border?

The bill would allocate \$25 billion in funding to border security. Amongst its many proposals for increased border security, the bill calls for physical and tactical infrastructure along the border, as well as technological deployment of mobile and remote video surveillance, unmanned aircraft, ground sensors, and more, to enhance security. It would also employ “Operation Stonegarden” to increase coordination between Customs and Border Protection (CBP), state, and local law enforcement agencies, and would increase the number of CBP officers, Border Patrol agents, K-9 units, agricultural specialists, and intelligence units to focus on illegal immigration and drug smuggling. The bill also proposes increased penalties for those who cross the border without authorization and severe penalties and longer prison times for those who have crossed the border without authorization and have a criminal record or a prior deportation. The bill also incorporates “Sarah’s Law,” which mandates the detention of certain noncitizens who have been charged with crimes that resulted in death or serious bodily injury.

In addition, the bill aims to address transnational criminal organizations by implementing new authorities to target “spotters” (individuals tracking Border Patrol movements in order to smuggle humans and drugs across the border) and increase penalties for anyone caught at the border with a firearm, as well as for those harboring or helping individuals unlawfully enter the United States. The bill also increases penalties for child sex traffickers.

How would the Dignity Act seek to address root causes of migration?

The bill proposes the implementation of a four-year strategy known as the “United States Strategy for Engagement in Central America” to advance reforms in Central American countries and address the key factors of migration. The operation is meant to: strengthen democratic governance, accountability, transparency, and the rule of law; combat corruption and impunity; improve access to justice; bolster the effectiveness and independence of the judicial system and prosecutors’ offices; improve effectiveness of civilian police forces; counter the violence and crimes perpetrated by criminal gangs and other illicit actors; disrupt illicit financial operations; promote greater respect for human and labor rights and fundamental freedoms; enhance accountability for government officials and personnel; enhance the capability of governments to protect and provide for vulnerable populations; address underlying causes of poverty and inequality; and prevent and respond to endemic levels of sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence.

The bill also increases legal authorities to target transnational criminals and gangs.

What is the USCCB’s position on the Dignity Act of 2023?

For decades, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has urged Congress to come together on a bipartisan basis to enact compassionate and comprehensive reform of the U.S. immigration system. This bipartisan bill is a welcome step in the right direction. As written, the Dignity Act offers positive changes to the country’s immigration policies, such as providing a pathway to citizenship for Dreamers and TPS holders. However, Catholic social teaching reminds us that vulnerable populations should be protected and welcomed and that the inherent dignity of migrants and undocumented persons must be respected. In that light, various aspects of the bill are a cause for concern and require further assessment, such as requiring high fees and other conditions

in order to acquire lawful immigration status. Further, many asylum seekers entering the United States have a friend or family member ready and willing to receive them upon arrival. The implementation of humanitarian campuses creates the possibility of unwarranted time in government custody for vulnerable individuals and is a potential cause of prolonged family separations. This is combined with expedited asylum adjudication timelines, which threaten due process for those lawfully seeking protection.

The USCCB is committed to engaging with the cosponsors from both parties and others regarding the Dignity Act to discuss the ways in which the proposed legislation could more closely reflect our moral obligations and values as a nation, as well as the principles of Catholic social teaching.

Where can I learn more about the Dignity Act?

More information about the Dignity Act can be found at:

- [Joint Press Release from Representatives Salazar and Escobar](#)
- [Bill Text](#)
- [American Immigration Lawyers Association Bill Overview](#)

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