



Moving Forward Together

The Role of Immigrants in Economic Recovery

This memo sets forth themes and ideas on talking about immigration during the current economic downturn. While the challenges are great, there are also opportunities in talking to audiences who matter to us most, and who are most persuadable in this area. These include communities of color, low-wage workers, and progressives. Together, these groups comprise the support we need to ensure that local, state, and federal policies are realistic, effective, and uphold the values of fairness and opportunity. To inspire them we need messages that, in addition to speaking to fears about the economy, also build on the sense that we are all in this together, that we need to encourage a role for government in crafting solutions, and that immigrants have important contributions to make.

Immigrants have always had great contributions to make to our country and our economy, so it only makes sense that we include them as we address the economic downturn and our efforts toward recovery. We need to make sure that it's possible for everyone to play a role in fixing the mess we're in.

A Core Narrative:

Workable solutions that uphold our values and help us move forward together

We recommend structuring messages under a shared narrative, developed in concert with advocates from around the country in 2008. This framework is based on recent public opinion research, insight from media monitoring and analysis, and the experience of a range of immigration advocates. It has also been well received in very early focus group testing. This intelligence suggests the following principles for communications on immigration:

- **Emphasize workable solutions:** While immigration policy currently takes a backseat to anxieties about the economy, Americans generally agree that our immigration system needs fixing, and that it's unrealistic to deport 12 million people. We need to continue to promote solutions that appeal to this commonsense acknowledgment, and that emphasize that economic recovery requires the input and participation of everyone here. It is also true that many of our key audiences do not realize or understand the barriers undocumented immigrants face in trying to become legal. Messages should emphasize that there are no workable solutions for many people already living and working here, and that those who are currently undocumented want to be here legally, but have limited or no options.
- **Infuse messages with values:** January's inauguration helped to reignite Americans' pride in core values like opportunity, community, equality, and shared responsibility. While invoking such values is not a silver bullet in messaging, research shows that the public reacts positively to values-based messages, and is motivated to protect the values they consider central to our country and our history. In the cases of due process and detention, research has found this approach to be particularly effective.
- **Encourage moving forward together:** The economic crisis gives anti-immigrant groups yet another opportunity to try to drive wedges between immigrants, African Americans, and low-wage workers. We should remind these audiences of shared values and common interests as well as solutions that expand opportunity for everyone—for example, combining an earned



pathway to citizenship with enhanced civil rights enforcement, living wages, police accountability, and job training for communities experiencing job and financial insecurity.

- **Move from “Myth Busting” to documenting *our* story.** There are many myths and falsehoods about immigrants, especially undocumented workers, in the public discourse, and it is imperative that the truth be told. But research shows that a strategy of repeating and explicitly “busting” those myths generally serves to reinforce them in the public’s mind. We recommend instead using accurate facts affirmatively to support our own values-based story.
- **Know the opposing narrative:** Anti-immigrant spokespeople are consistent in their use of two dominant themes, regardless of their specific point: Law and Order (“What part of ‘illegal’ don’t you understand?”) and the Overwhelming of Scarce Resources (the notion that there are not enough jobs, health care or education to go around).

Talking Point Guidelines

The following bullets are examples of how to talk about immigration during tough economic times. It is understood, however, that the immigration movement has diverse audiences, regional needs, and challenges. We propose using the shared narrative as a general guide while focusing on the following themes, but using the wording, symbols, and stories that best suit your needs.

We need workable solutions that uphold our nation’s values and help us move forward together...

- We need everyone’s help and know-how to repair our economy, improve education, and generate jobs. Immigrants have a stake in those systems—we are caregivers and health professionals, teachers and students—and we are a part of the solution.
- Reactionary policies that force people into the shadows haven’t worked, and they are not consistent with our values. Those policies hurt all of us by encouraging exploitation and low-wage, under-the-table employment that depresses wages. We need policies that help immigrants contribute and participate fully in our society.
- It’s clear that our economy and our trade and immigration policies are no longer working for anyone but a select few. Instead of scapegoating immigrants and terrorizing families and communities, we should make America work for all of us.
- Currently, it’s almost impossible for many undocumented immigrants who have lived and worked here for years to become legal, in spite of their great desire to do so. A system that denies a whole subset of workers the rights and responsibilities the rest of us enjoy is not workable or fair – and it’s not helping to repair our fractured economy.
- We need to protect all workers and law-abiding employers. Our immigration system needs to work for everyone, not just for those employers looking for low-cost labor. Part of the solution is recognizing that it would be far better if all immigrant workers were here legally and could exercise the same rights on the job as native-born workers. Equal rights strengthen the bargaining power of all workers. The first step toward realizing this equality is ensuring that our system makes it possible for undocumented immigrant workers to become legal, which it currently does not.¹

¹ From Talking Points from the National Immigration Forum, America’s Voice and the Immigration Policy Center.



- Our policies must recognize that we're all in this together, with common human rights and responsibilities. If one group can be exploited, underpaid and prevented from becoming part of our society, our common humanity is threatened, and none of us truly enjoy the opportunity and rights that America stands for.

Immigration Reform

- To bring stability, opportunity, and fairness to American workers, families, and communities, we need to enact common sense immigration reform. Congress and the President need to work together to get a handle on our immigration system and find solutions that help all workers fully participate in our economy.
- We need to protect American taxpayers. We also need to fix our immigration system to move towards eliminating the underground economy it perpetuates. By legalizing the undocumented workforce, we will bring these workers out of the shadows and put more workers and employers on our tax rolls.²
- Anti-immigrant extremists are preventing a legal immigration system that works and distracting us from addressing real challenges like rebuilding our economy.

African American Audiences:

- The African American community has always been the conscience of our country when it comes to human rights and dignity. Keeping 12 million people in the shadows, without human rights and subject to exploitation, is not in the moral or economic interest of black people, or our nation, and we have to stand against it.
- Immigrants and African Americans are increasingly part of the same neighborhoods and communities, and we need solutions that enable us to rise together with all Americans. We each consistently list quality education and affordable health care among our highest priorities. All of our kids suffer when we allow our urban schools and hospitals to flounder, and we all benefit, along with our country, when we invest in strong schools and quality health care, as well as living wages, decent working conditions and freedom from discrimination.
- The recent economic stimulus package has addressed some of the issues facing our communities, but we have to make sure that investment is spent in communities where it is needed most. We have a better chance at success in these areas if we come together to protect our most vulnerable communities, including communities of color, and immigrants.
- These are tough times, but squabbling amongst ourselves will only hold all of us back. We need to work together for practical solutions that ensure opportunity and protect our human rights.

The Opportunity Agenda continues to research public opinion, media reporting, and best practices for communicating about immigrant opportunity. For more information, or to contribute your ideas, please visit us at www.opportunityagenda.org.

² From Talking Points developed by the National Immigration Forum, America's Voice and the Immigration Policy Center