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Korean Americans and Comprehensive Immigration Reform

Overview:

Like many other Asian American communities, Korean Americans are relative newcomers to the United States. According to the 2000 Census, approximately 78% of the 1.2 million Korean Americans had immigrated to the U.S. Moreover, over 71% of Korean immigrants came to the U.S. after 1980.

The Korean American population can be divided into the following categories:

22.3% are native-born U.S. citizens.

39.5% are foreign-born, naturalized U.S. citizens.

38.2% are foreign-born, non U.S. citizens. (This group includes lawful permanent residents, legal nonimmigrants in the U.S. to work or study, and undocumented immigrants).

Impact of the Broken Immigration System on the Korean American Community:

Separation of Families

The majority of Koreans immigrate to the U.S. through the family-sponsored immigration system. In 2004, 56% of immigrants from Korea came to the U.S. through family immigration.

But it can take years, sometimes over a decade, for Koreans to immigrate to the U.S. through the family immigration system. For example, a U.S. citizen petitioning for a brother or sister from Korea must wait approximately 11 years before his or her sibling can immigrate to the U.S. A lawful permanent resident must wait approximately 4 years before her or his spouse and/or minor children can immigrate to the U.S.

Undocumented Immigrants

Unless you have a qualifying U.S. citizen or permanent resident family member who can petition for you, or have highly specialized skills and/or post-secondary degree, it is virtually impossible to legally immigrate to the U.S. As a result, the population of undocumented immigrants continues to rise.

The estimates of undocumented Korean immigrants vary widely. The former U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service estimated that approximately 55,000 undocumented immigrants from Korea were living in the U.S. as of 2000. In contrast, a study by researchers from the Urban Institute, Bowling Green State University, and the University of California at Irvine¹ estimated that approximately 190,000 undocumented Koreans were living in the U.S. as of 2000. This would mean that roughly one in six Korean Americans do not have legal immigration status. Moreover, the number of undocumented Korean immigrants has increased five fold in the last decade.

Undocumented Koreans work in a wide range of essential industries. But because they lack legal immigration status, these undocumented immigrants are vulnerable to abuse and exploitations at the

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workplace. Moreover, undocumented Korean children who grow up in the U.S. do not have access to post-secondary education or legal work opportunities in the field of their choice or study. Under the current immigration system, no matter how long undocumented immigrants work, pay taxes, and contribute to their communities, they will continue to live in fear and uncertainty, with no hope of becoming fully integrated members of our country.

Immigrant Worker Rights

Worker rights and protection are priority concerns for Asian Pacific American and Korean American workers. It is estimated that 18.8 million or 14% of the U.S. workforce are immigrants. Of this number, 4.9 million, or 26% of immigrant workers, are from Asia. Immigrant workers earn less than non-immigrant workers and are also less likely to have job-based health insurance. Moreover, those who are Limited English Proficient not only earn lower wages, but are less able to assert their rights in the workplace. In the case of Korean Americans, close to 30% of those over 25 years of age do not speak English well.

Solution:

In order to solve these problems in the long term, Korean Americans need an immigration system that will:

- Reduce the tremendous backlogs in the family immigration system and facilitate timely reunification of families;
- Provide legal status and a path to permanent residence for undocumented immigrants who work hard and pay taxes;
- Create legal ways for people who want to contribute to our economy to come work in the U.S., coupled with innovative wage and labor condition protections for U.S. and immigrant workers; and
- Assist more immigrants to learn English and prepare for citizenship.

Additional Resources:

More information on these and other immigration issues can be found at:

National Korean American Service and Education Consortium, Inc: www.nakasec.org

Asian American Justice Center: www.advancingequality.org

This document was developed in conjunction with the Asian American Justice Center.

¹ “Estimates of the Legal and Unauthorized Foreign-Born Population for the United States and Selected States Based on Census 2000,” by Jeffery S. Passel, Jennifer Van Hook, and Frank D. Bean, June 1, 2004.