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Creating a White House Capacity to Address the Cross-cutting Nature Of Immigration and Integration Policy Issues

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The White House must act to address the urgent cross-agency need for coordination of analysis and policymaking at the intersections of immigration and immigrant integration policy. One approach would be to create a White House Office on Immigrant Integration that has a clear mandate to convene and referee key policy conversations. Another approach would be to embed this function within the Domestic Policy Council. Irrespective of form, the function is clear: pulling together the immigration and immigrant integration policy and program work of the Federal government. This important structural change will allow the White House to: a) ensure that relevant data and expertise from across agencies are brought to bear on key challenges facing the Administration where impacts on or of immigrants and their children are of concern; and b) create an explicit feedback loop to ensure that data and other information on the impacts of Federal immigration policy on receiving communities and on the outcomes of integration efforts are used to inform future immigration policy-making efforts.

Immigration to the US over the past 30 years has been unique in many respects:

- The number of immigrants settling in the country – authorized and unauthorized – is higher than in any other period of US history. Since 1980 roughly 34 million immigrants have entered the US and the children of immigrants now number nearly 16 million, almost one-quarter of all US children under 18;
- Immigrant families have dispersed beyond the large, historic, immigrant receiving states (California, New York, Texas, Florida and Illinois) and settled in substantial numbers in new-growth states in the Southeast and Southwest. These states are generally low-tax and low-service states and their education, health and other service systems often struggle to meet the new demands placed on them;
- Today's immigrant population is also very diverse: it is more racially and geographically diverse than that of previous eras, with over 80 percent of immigrants coming from Latin American and Asia; it is also more linguistically diverse – and even though Spanish predominates, many local school and hospital systems report that over 100 languages are spoken by their residents. The population is also diverse in the skills and education levels that immigrants bring: today's flow is concentrated at the ends of the skill spectrum, with roughly one-third of immigrants lacking a high school diploma (versus 12 percent of natives) and one-quarter hold at least a college degree.

The Administration will likely be engaged for some time in resolving the fate of the nation's 10-12 million unauthorized immigrant residents, along with the challenge of modernizing our immigration system so that it can become more adept in responding to the intense pressures placed on nearly all sectors of our economy by the globalizing world economy. However, sustained high rates of immigration over the past 20-30 years have had wide-ranging impacts in states and localities, and set into motion a complex set of policy dynamics that extend across many major federal agencies – from the Department of Homeland Security to the departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Labor, Housing and Urban Development and Justice.

If an animating goal of our immigration policy is to create a stronger and more prosperous nation, then our immigration policy must be judged by its outcomes for immigrants and their families, for the communities in which they settle, and for the social, cultural and economic health of the nation as a whole. In other words, the data, policy, program and funding indicators on local impacts and integration outcomes must be "fed back" across the domestic policy agenda and to immigration policy development activities. To accomplish this, White

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House policy staff must coordinate other key actors in Federal agencies to marshall the diverse data and policy inputs needed for thoughtful and thorough consideration of immigration policy impacts and options.

In addition, and simultaneously, the Administration will want to create an informed and coherent approach to some of the extremely challenging domestic policy debates it faces where impacts of, or on, immigrants must be carefully considered. Examples include:

- Ensuring that stimulus efforts have a long-term, positive impact on immigrant/Latino and LEP communities: while this is no doubt an important goal of the Administration, flaws in the current design of the adult literacy and workforce training systems will almost certainly prevent most adult LEP immigrants (who comprise over half of all adult immigrants) from finding pathways to family-sustaining wage jobs;

- A legalization program of significant scope may be enacted during the period that stimulus funding would be expanding and hopefully reforming the adult literacy and workforce skills training systems. If the program contains English acquisition requirements in order to maintain or advance one's legal status (as most recent bills sought to do) an unprecedented demand for almost two billion hours of English instruction would be unleashed. The Administration will need to actively plan approaches to prevent this demand from flowing largely into low-performing, low-payoff ESL and civics instruction and rather harness it for long-term education and workforce skill gains;

- One of the most politically volatile issues in the health care reform debate is the extent of inclusion of the nation's 10-12 million unauthorized immigrants in "universal" coverage. Nearly all major proposals to date have either been silent on this issue or have actively excluded unauthorized immigrants from coverage. While Executive branch conversations on expanding coverage are progressing, there will likely be a very vigorous debate in other top-level circles about the implementation of sponsor liability rules for immigrant family members who use health and other means-tested benefits. The Administration must have a process to weave together disparate policy concerns and thinking from its immigration, health policy and health financing areas in order to fully explore its options, both for immigrants already residing in the US AND those who will arrive in the future;

- A legalization program for the large unauthorized population also poses significant cross-cutting issues: especially questions of state and local impact aid for K-12 education, health care, and adult ESL and workforce training; and also the level of involvement by state and local governments that will likely be needed to assist the unprecedented number of applicants for such a program. State impact aid under the 1986 IRCA law has been widely judged as a failure: it was administratively burdensome and poorly conceived, and thus resulted in little gain for immigrants who were supposed to receive services, and no significant gain in the capacity of state or local agencies receiving funds to serve immigrant residents.

Numerous other issues could be cited in the areas of K-12 education (where funding and an array of policy and capacity issues are sore spots for state and local governments); language access rights (where the Executive branch has promoted language rights but has provided little policy or funding support at the Agency level); and in the engagement of state and local law enforcement entities in the regulation of immigrants and immigration.

The new White House policy coordination function described here will allow the Administration to both leverage data and expertise across agencies on key domestic policy issues involving immigrants, and it will ensure that essential data about immigration impacts and integration concerns are connected to immigration policy development. Governments in other developed nations have an array of supports that allow them to achieve this sort of feedback on the results of their immigration and integration policies; examining those systems and deciding which might be successfully adapted for US purposes could be another important contribution of this office. If it is of interest, the authors would be happy to sketch some of these approaches, including those of Canada, France, Australia, Germany, Norway and the Netherlands.

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