Immigration Reform and Immigrant Women’s Health

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The National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health (NLIRH) recognizes the historic steps taken this year to achieve comprehensive immigration reform, an issue of immense importance in our communities. We recognize the Senate passage of the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act (S. 744), as an important step forward. However, NLIRH remains deeply concerned with the bill’s severe restrictions on access to health care and safety net programs and the consequences for women’s health. While S. 744 begins to address the many injustices and flaws with our immigration laws and policies, it also forces immigrant women and families wait up to 15 years or more before they can participate in affordable health care programs like Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program. During these 15 years, immigrant women and families would be working, paying taxes - and sadly, praying not to get sick or hurt.

For women with undetected breast or cervical cancer or other untreated illnesses, a 15-year wait to see a doctor could be the difference between life and death. We know that health care enables immigrant women in our communities to start businesses, finish their education, and contribute to their workplaces and families. To force women to wait over a decade for health care undermines the potential of entire communities and our nation’s economy. Additionally, denying aspiring citizens access to the very health programs they pay into with their tax dollars is inherently unfair. Restrictions on access to health care in S. 744 are unjust, unwise, and un-American – and out of line with our nation’s views and values.¹

Immigrant women and families work hard, pay taxes, and are committed to being in America. They should be able to pay their fair share for health care and should be included in our health care system, just like everyone else. As such, we urge Congress to lift the 5-year bar currently imposed on lawfully present immigrants living, working, and paying taxes in the United States and improve health care options for aspiring citizens. Doing so will strengthen the health and productivity of our families, communities, and nation’s economy.

¹ 63% of Americans believe those on the roadmap to citizenship should be eligible for Medicaid and 59% believe they should be eligible for affordability options under the ACA. HENRY J. KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION. Kaiser Health Tracking Poll: February 2013. February 27, 2013. http://kff.org/report-section/february-2013-tracking-poll-findings/