NACo applauds movement toward comprehensive immigration reform

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The National Association of Counties (NACo) today applauded the efforts within the U.S. Senate to move the country closer toward comprehensive immigration reform. NACo is currently reviewing the legislative language released today by the bipartisan “Gang of Eight” ahead of key hearings later this week and early next week in the Senate Judiciary Committee. The bill contains several provisions, however, that NACo wants to highlight as particularly positive:

- The bill reauthorizes the State Criminal Alien Assistance Program and authorizes new grants for communications equipment for state and local law enforcement along the southern border.
- Counties, cities and states are treated the same as the private sector in the E-verify requirements.
- The path to citizenship for the 11 million unauthorized individuals is strict but fair and includes an expedited track for individuals who were brought into the country by their parents before the age of 16, known as the DREAM Act.
- Local and state governments are eligible for the new, albeit small, competitive grant program for integration services, including English language skills and civics classes.
- There is a new program funded by the fees paid by employers who hire foreign science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) workers which will be used to provide scholarships to U.S. STEM students and improve STEM education.
- There are increases in the H1B worker visas, which includes physicians, improvements to the program for physicians in professional shortage areas and expansion of the non-immigrant nurses visas in health professional shortage areas.
- The program for foreign STEM students with at least a master’s degree from U.S. institutions is included in the bill.
- The Jobs Originated Through Launching Travel (JOLT) provision, which streamlines the tourist visa program in order to increase tourism is included in the bill.
- There is a new visa program for low-skilled workers, which could include in-home service providers.
- The new agricultural worker visa would include all aspects of agriculture, including employers that need year-long workers such as the dairy industry.

“On behalf of the nation’s counties, NACo applauds the efforts of the so-called ‘Gang of Eight’ in their sincere attempt to rise above the partisan divide and find a workable solution to one of the most important issues of our time,” said NACo President Chris Rodgers, commissioner, Douglas County, Neb. “How the United States addresses immigration reform is critical to our nation’s future.”
States protects its international borders, issues visas, grants legal status and citizenship and governs our immigrant population today and in the future is critical to the U.S. economy and our quality of life.”

While a federal issue, counties are a key player in how immigration system affects families, communities and the local government services and programs that serve them. Counties are required by law to provide emergency health, elementary and secondary education and public safety to every U.S. resident regardless of immigration status.

On March 4, NACo adopted policy calling on enactment of comprehensive immigration reform that provides for uniform enforcement of all existing laws, secures our borders and includes a national strategy for coordination among federal, state, local and tribal authorities.

Further, NACo seeks reform that establishes a sensible and orderly guest worker program, imposes no unfunded mandates on state and local governments, includes no mandates on counties to enforce immigration laws, preserves the eligibility of legal non-citizens for federally-funded health benefits and provides a sustainable funding stream to counties for their cost of providing health services to legal non-citizens who are denied federally-funded health benefits. NACo has been working with other state and local organizations on the impact assistance grants and has met with several offices in the House and Senate to include that provision as the bills make their way through the legislative process.

In addition, NACo seeks reform that establishes an earned path to citizenship that includes registering, background checks, demonstrating employment, learning English and civics, paying back taxes and fees that may be required; improves and simplifies the current legal immigration system; and provides green cards for science, technology, engineering and mathematics students who have received a graduate degree from American universities.

For more information, contact Jim Philipps at 202.942.4220 or jphilipps@naco.org.

###

The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo provides essential services to the nation’s 3,069 counties. NACo advances issues with a unified voice before the federal government, improves the public’s understanding of county government, assists counties in finding and sharing innovative solutions through education and research, and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information about NACo, visit www.naco.org.