

COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM AND AFRICAN AMERICAS – WHO BENEFITS

**Media Briefing - National Council of Negro Women
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Gwen McKinney: Good morning and thank you for attending. My name is Gwen McKinney, and I would like to express my appreciation for all of you who are here both physically and joining us telephonically. I hope that this is the beginning of a continuing dialogue with African American media representatives. We are also joined by telephonic audience as I had noted a moment ago and you will have an opportunity to participate during the Q&A segment.

There is information in your packet that includes bios on the speakers and other background that we hope will be helpful. A transcript and audio file of this session will also be available following the briefing and I believe it will be hosted online at www.mckpr.com. Our contact information and other details will also be included, and for those who would like more information we certainly welcome sharing it. There have been a number of requests to interview the presenters following this and we can also facilitate that as well.

The focus of this conversation this morning is really on Comprehensive Immigration Reform and African Americans: Who Benefits? As the immigration reform debate has dominated the news cycles, we take this opportunity to engage in the discourse and to offer a perspective from a very stellar line-up of presenters who come to us with a great depth of knowledge in economics, public policies, civil rights and even history.

It is neither possible nor humane to deport the estimated 12 million undocumented people who are in the United States. We all accept that as a fact.

So there are four premises that help inform this discussion. One: undocumented immigrants will not go away. Two: comprehensive immigration reform is essential to fix what is – can only be considered -- a broken immigration system. Three: some type of immigration reform will probably happen whether African-American people are at the table in this debate or not. Four: being at the table, means that African-American community interests are represented.

At this point, I would like to turn the floor to Wade Henderson. He will make brief remarks and introduce our presenters, and he'll be followed by each speaker in the order that they are seated. I would like to ask each speaker, for the telephone audience, to state their name again before they speak.

Wade will do one round of introduction and then each speaker will go sequentially, and then we will go right into a Q&A because we do want to provide as much time as possible for a dialogue. Thank you. And Wade.

Wade Henderson, Leadership Conference On Civil Rights: Thank you Gwen. Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I'm Wade Henderson, President of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights is the nation's oldest, largest, and most diverse national coalition of civil and human rights organizations working to build an America as good as its ideals. Thank you for joining us in what we think to be an important conversation about one of the most challenging policy issues of our time and one that we think is also a compelling civil and human rights issue. That is the question of immigration reform and what it means to this country in the 21st Century.

I am joined this morning by four distinguished colleagues who will contribute their perspectives to this important debate. Dr. Mary Frances Berry; Professor and Historian, University of Pennsylvania; Stephanie Jones, Executive Director of the National Urban League's Policy Institute in Washington DC; Alan Jenkins, Executive Director of the Opportunity Agenda and Dr. Steven Pitts; an Economist with the Center for Labor Research and Education, University of California at Berkeley. Thank you all for joining us this morning.

As I mentioned the question of immigration reform, we believe, is not only a challenge in policy issue as is quite evident from the intensity of the debates surrounding this question both in the country and in the Congress. But we also feel that it's a compelling civil and human rights issue. Why is it a compelling civil rights issue? Well, in large measure the current status of undocumented immigrants in the United States, roughly 12 million individuals, many of whom have made a long-term commitment to remain in the United States, creates a challenge not only for their own communities but for the American population at large.

Having such a large population outside of the body politic of the United States, outside of the protection of law enforcement where they fear reporting crimes out of fear of deportation; outside of the standard health system, where many fear seeking health care either because they don't have the resources and are not covered by insurance. Or because fear of deportation, using only emergency services when they are absolutely necessary. And lastly, their failure to participate in the political process.

They are not permitted to function as citizens with a stake in the future direction of our economy and our democracy, where they don't have the ability to vote, where they don't have the ability to speak to the questions that affect their lives on a daily basis poses a challenge to the effectiveness of our own democracy.

So we in the civil and human rights movement feel that legalization of the 12 million undocumented immigrants in this country is one of the most important challenges that we face. But we also recognize that immigration reform involves many competing visions of this country and also many challenges.

I think most Americans would agree that immigration reform is a compelling national interest. I think many are deeply concerned about the effect of continued undocumented immigration in this country and at the same time the debate is really not over how to or whether to handle this issue, but how and what are the details.

I want to give a quick legislative update on the current status of the immigration debate, outline a couple of issues that we think are critically important, call on my colleagues to address them, and then help to answer questions during the Q&A.

First, from a legislative standpoint as you know, the Senate of the United States is currently debating a bipartisan Comprehensive Immigration Bill. This is the second week that the debate has ensued. It is unclear, quite frankly, whether the Senate will produce a bill at all or whether the bill they produce will be acceptable to a majority of Americans. Even those of us in the immigrant rights, civil rights, and human rights movement have concerns about the immigration bill in its present form. We recognize, however, that it is important that this process go forward with the understanding that there may yet be an improved circumstance with a totality of the bill and for that reason alone, we support a continuation of the process.

I remind you from a legislative standpoint that even if the Senate produces a bill, there are still two more stops on the process before a final bill is prepared. The House of Representatives has to speak and then finally the two bills are put together in a conference forum and that conference produces yet a third bill. So we do have opportunities to improve provisions in the bill that we think are problematic and would require us to withhold our support even as we encourage movement in the process. However, developments that have occurred within the last 24 hours, have injected additional uncertainty as to whether the Senate will complete its work.

Senator Harry Reid, the Senate majority leader, has indicated his intention to try to bring the immigration debate to a close this week. He wanted to do that by invoking closure, the requirement that the Senate cut off debate on legislation, but that requires 60 votes. He is arguing that two weeks of debate is sufficient to consider the comprehensive issues, and that a continuation beyond this time not only puts a burden on other important legislative issues, but it really is a dilatory tactic. It gives those in the Senate who may not have a desire to support immigration reform an opportunity to take additional legislative shots by posing amendments that threaten the bipartisan compromise that has been worked out.

Republicans have responded to this threat by arguing that there has been insufficient time to debate this important issue. They note that this is a bill that did not go through the regular committee process that it was simply brought to the floor for debate and that under those circumstances it is not clear whether they will make the argument that they have not enjoyed an opportunity to bring forth amendments that they think are critically important.

That clash of political will between Senator Reid and his Republican minority may well end up producing nothing at the end of the day and therefore it is uncertain whether there will be a bill. We should know within the next 48-72 hours whether this process will conclude. Lastly, there are also additional amendments that from time to time are offered against the bill that pose real problems. Let me give you one example. Last night Senator Mitch McConnell offered an amendment that would require voter IDs to be imposed not just on newly legalized immigrants, but on American citizens across the board. This is a pernicious Trojan horse amendment that had nothing to do with immigration reform but has everything to do with compromising and disfranchising the votes of American citizens who would otherwise not have the kind of voter ID requirement. Because he allocated sums – set sums as necessary to implement the law under his bill -- it brought that amendment within the budget purview of the Senate procedures. Thus it moved it from a 50 vote requirement, a simple majority, to 60 votes because of budgetary provisions.

The civil rights community rallied aggressively against that provision as we have when the Voting Rights Act was debated and other election reforms decisions were considered and we successfully beat it by vote of, 61 to 42, I am sorry – 53 to 42, so we beat the amendment, that's the bottom-line and we were pleased about that, and so that's an indication.

Now lastly, there are two questions that I think are really important. It is often assumed that African Americans have no direct interest in the immigration debate. In previous immigration discussions you will note that there has been the perception that there was little involvement from African American organizations or the broader civil rights community on these questions. Nothing could be further from the truth.

African Americans recognize that we have a stake like all Americans in the future of our country, and we refuse to be marginalized by those who could see our interest is not being directly affected by these questions. To assume that African Americans are hostile to the question of immigration reform is completely false.

When one looks at an organization like the NAACP and notes that for years the NAACP has spoken out on behalf of Haitian refugees going back to 1923 when James Weldon Johnson conducted the first human rights mission on behalf of the NAACP and writing a report regarding U.S. invasion of Haiti. It continued up through the 1960's when our own civil rights movement was at its most active height and legislative changes were taking place. And I remind you that the reform of the immigrant rights movement at that time occurred in 1965 coinciding directly with the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

So clearly there were changes in the law. And then lastly in the 1980's, African Americans strongly challenged, for example; the exclusion of Haitian refugees and the treatment of other refugees' when in fact they were being expelled from Haiti and questioned the fairness of our immigration laws when Cuban refugees were treated differently than Haitian refugees even though they came under similar circumstances and so the argument that we don't have an interest is false.

Secondly, the notion that somehow our economic interests are adversely affected will be discussed by others on this panel, so I won't go into that, but I think that's obviously a central point in the conversation. The status quo that is under debate is not an acceptable option and so the failure to enact comprehensive reform will not, *I repeat*, will not resolve the central problems that are challenging this country or that are affecting the African-American community. Let me remind you that for those who are concerned about the affects of undocumented immigration on the economic prospects of low wage African Americans, perpetuating the status quo virtually guarantees that there would be approximately a half-million undocumented immigrants who come into the United States annually. And assuming your analysis is correct that they pose a threat to the economic interest of African Americans -- which I dispute -- one has to be concerned about this unaddressed problem of such a magnitude of continuing undocumented immigration.

Thirdly, if Congress does not enact compressive reform sends a very problematic signal to state and local governments who are grappling with some of these difficult questions of how they should respond as local communities to these issues. Places like Hazelton, Pennsylvania, for example, where city officials enacted a local ordinance to prohibit individuals from renting property to undocumented immigrants otherwise facing penalty, now challenged in federal court; or the Herndon, Virginia incident where day workers pose a real challenge to city officials.

I can assure you that failure to enact the comprehensive bill will perpetuate a continuation of those efforts. The vacuum left by a failure of the federal government to respond to this issue is filled by local political authorities.

So, for those who have a real concern about the long-term effects on undocumented immigration, the failure to enact a comprehensive bill means that you will have at least the minimum of three additional years before Congress responds to these questions in the future. And for that reason alone there should be some interest in trying to revive and pursue this issue.

Now one last point: there has been an effort on the part of some immigration restrictionists to develop relationships or speak on behalf of low-wage workers, particularly those who are African Americans. It is argued that because they believed this economic question which is going to be discussed by Dr. Steven Pitts, is of such a central issue that they can somehow create wedge politics between blacks and Latinos around the issue of immigration reform. It's really quite ironic because many of the individuals who purport to speak most aggressively on behalf of African American interests in the political context, are themselves individuals who have opposed, in other context, benefits that the African American community would need. Those who try to encourage us to oppose the immigration bill are the same individuals who had opposed reauthorizing the Voting Rights Act and challenged that in the last Congress; are the same individuals who have opposed Head Start and other programs that we think are important and so it should be viewed in that context.

It's a false issue. We are not going to be divided by wedge politics, coalition politics which is what the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights stands for and our view is an important consideration. No organization working today to advance civil and human rights has sufficient strength unto itself to pursue their goals objectively without working in coalition. If you are not practicing coalition politics, you are not practicing politics of the 21st Century.

Those, among other reasons, are why we support the notion of comprehensive immigration reforms, even though we may have some problems with the current debate in the Senate. I've gone on too long... let me now ask my colleague, Dr. Mary Frances Berry of the University of Pennsylvania, to contribute her thoughts. Thank you.

Dr. Mary Frances Berry, Professor and Historian, University Of Pennsylvania:
Thank you Wade. You said everything, but let me try not to do what my mother warned my brother to do when he first started preaching. She would go sit in the church and listen to him preach. She said don't try to tell everybody everything in one sermon. I am going to try not to do that...

I don't understand really why Gwen and Wade asked me to do this because I am a contrarian. The bottom-line where I come out is, yes, I support comprehensive immigration reform based on my view and the reality. But I get there in a very different way. And my views on these matters are that they are more complicated than our message and also that it does us no good to tell black folk things that they know aren't true.

People look at their own reality, and their own communities. If they see things that don't jive with what you just told them, that conform to their perceptions, they are unlikely to agree with you. They may be wrong and they may be looking at what an economist and social scientist might say... well that's not scientific for them. They just look at what's going on around. And they look at their own histories and what they know about their neighborhoods.

So as far as I can tell, yes, it's true that immigrants keep coming. You can't stop them. Immigrants of all kinds; this has been true from the beginning of the republic. It's true in any country where there is a pull factor, where people think there's jobs or opportunities. I mean, there are countries all around the world – places where people want to go. Internal migration is the same. Within countries people go where they think the opportunities are and you can't stop them...unless you knock them in the head or it's a war and they can't get across the ocean, as has happened previously. But people leave for a lot of reasons where they are and they go to the place where think they are going to be better off...that's true of all the waves of immigrants who have come to this country in our history...and they're not going to stop either.

That's one of the realities that black folks, have to accept. Immigrants are going to keep on coming. You can talk about building walls or whatever you want to do, it doesn't make any sense, it's going to keep happening, unless the push-pull factors change and things are so good where they are, they decide not to come. It's just that simple.

And when you look at the history of how immigration has occurred in this country and the policies related to it, at every turn it is true that workers who come in who are low-wage workers who work at menial occupations, whether it was in the mines or in the factories or whatever it is, they did compete with workers who were already here. And I am not just talking about black workers, they competed with the people who were here, what happened in any individual case, depended on where you were, whether the economy was expanding or not expanding, whether it was war time, peace time, a lot of different factors. But all the voices of the people that you can go back and look at historically, whether you are talking about Native Americans, and I don't mean native American-Indians, I mean white folks, who were already here and then the European immigrants come from southern and eastern Europe and from Ireland and so on. You hear them squealing and complaining about these people are taking jobs and they are – you know, they are doing all these things.

It's also true that immigrants came in -- white immigrants -- and took over entire sectors of the economy. If you came from Ireland, you ended up dominating the police departments. How do you think...you think Irish people just loved to be policemen in Boston and New York or whatever? And people pass those jobs along.

In families, Italian Americans became sanitation workers and they controlled the whole garbage business in the cities where they were moving. Every sector was claimed. Black folks complain when the great migration came and blacks started moving to the north; in some of these places you couldn't get into any of these jobs because people had already taken them.

It's also true that every African American leader complained about immigration in different times in our history as being something that hurt African Americans. Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and W.B. Du Bois, agreed on practically nothing. But they agreed about immigration's harmful affects on black workers and they worried about it.

Part of the history of immigration and what happened in federal policy is about race in general color consciousness. Every white immigrant group that came here to the United States sought to do what historians called *becoming white*. When they came they were the downtrodden. We have a whole field of whiteness studies, about how the Irish became white, the Poles became white, Italians became white...and what they did along the way is inculcate American racism. One way to distinguish yourself from everybody else is to be the other black folks, the subordinate/inferiors who came not as immigrants but through forced immigration -- decedents of slaves. We are not talking about the later coming immigrants who are from Africa or the Caribbean.

And so they became white, and once they became white they start distinguishing themselves. African American's are the only group who never had the luxury of *becoming white*. Although, it is true that immigrants from the African continent and from the Caribbean have in some cases distinguished themselves from the descendents of slaves who are here. They are somehow better because we are descended from people who were slaves...

In other communities the "color thing" is a problem. Among Latinos, even within families, people who are the darker ones are the inferior ones. That's a reflection of the color thing and as you go around the world that's true. The Latino immigration question is also complicated by that.

People's views on what to do come from where they are and what they know about the history. Black folks in this country have at every stage supported on a moral basis, despite what the leadership said, the interest of morality in favor of fairness and justice for people.

In 1915 when [Congress] tried to cut off immigration from Africa so that no Africans could come here, the NAACP fought like hell to keep that from happening and to keep it out of the bill so that our people from the African continent could continue to come here. When they had restrictions on people from the Caribbean and from Canada (which is where many went before they came here), the NAACP fought very hard to keep that from happening, seeing that it was discriminatory in a broader sense.

So we are always conflicted by, as Frederick Douglass notes, what we see as moral and what we see we should do. Now, here is where we are based on this unhappy history of what has happened.

The Latino (reality) is complicated by the whiteness phenomena, people trying to become white. In the Latino legal circles and communities until after Brown [vs. Board of Education Supreme Court ruling] was decided Latinos argued that they were not like us, that they were *other whites*. They argued that in court. It was only after Brown was decided that they wanted privileges based on the fact that they were distinct from us. And I don't blame any of the groups for doing this...who wants to be with subordinated folks. But all of this stuff is complicated. When [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan and [Nathan] Glazer wrote their book *Beyond the Melting Pot* they argued that blacks in the United States should pretend that they are immigrants and forget slavery, forget Jim Crow, forget everything that happened to us. Start our history with a modern period in the 20th Century and pretend we just got here. And then try to inculcate immigrant ethics...There was big debate around this. And a lot of black people (aside from taking offense at being told forget about slavery and Jim Crow) said, 'but we are not immigrants; we don't understand this.'

You know, when Katrina happened, there were people talking about the Katrina people ought to look at themselves as refugees or immigrants. Remember all that discussion? So all this is complicated...So what do we do?

When we say we support immigration reform along the lines that our allies want -- that is we support legalization, family reunification and all the amendments that they want because we act in coalition with them -- why should we act in coalition with them? Immigrants are going to keep coming; they are already here, and there are political implications for where they are and what power will be exercised. We would be foolish not to have coalitions. I mean, it would be like cutting your own throat...

Democrats want legalization, not [necessarily] because they love Latinos, but because they think they will vote for them. Some Republicans think they are going to vote for them like (they did for) Bush and so on. Others think if they are from Arizona or New Mexico or some place wherever they come from...Colorado...that they are going to end up voting Democratic and vote against them and they are going to have power and they don't want that to happen.

Everybody is thinking about their own situation – what benefits them. And that's why the conservatives got T. Willard Fair [to protest immigration] and they got all these things going because they want to protect and preserve their own power.

Some labor groups want Latinos legalized so they can organize them. I mean, everybody has interest to protect. So black people have to think about what it is they want.

Professional employers in the software industry want to bring in more highly educated people from India and [China] to be in the software industry. We have to think about what's happening to the folks who we are educating in computer science and the software industry...So everybody has to think of what will benefit them and what they will do. If we tell black folks that no one competes with them in jobs and they look out the window, like I did the other day, at the construction workers who were paving the street. I went out and said, "Hola!" to them and, "¿Como esta?"

Twenty five years ago guess who was paving the street? Now, you may say, 'Well that's just not real. You know, you saw that but that doesn't mean anything. The statistic show blah, blah, blah.' But I looked out the window and saw it. If I go to a fancy restaurant, I know who the waiters are now and who were the waiters then...So in all of these sectors when you talk to ordinary people you've got to tell them that you are aware of these things, that you are sensitive, you are not stupid...I mean, it's not like you don't see what they see because if you tell them that, they will say, 'Well you must be crazy.' You got to tell them all that but then tell them why it's necessary to support this in the interest of justice and in the interest of practical politics. To get the best kind of bill, there are certain demands we should make. Wade talked about the Haitians.

Our partners in the coalition ought to work much harder than they have to help us get the Haitians legalized, I mean with the same status as the Cubans. That's our issue. They ought to work just as hard as we work on Supreme Court justice appointees. They ought to work just as hard in court of appeals. As we work on trying to do something about the backlash against our issues. So, I think that this is all very practical since history tells us [mass immigration] is not going away and it's going to stay here.

Thank you very much.

Wade Henderson: Mary, thank you very much. Our next speaker is Stephanie J. Jones, Executive Director National Urban League's Policy Institute. Stephanie.

Stephanie J. Jones, Executive Director, National Urban League Policy Institute: Thank you Wade. Good morning everyone.

The National Urban League, has for years, more than 30 years, documented and reported on the inequality between white and black Americans in this country. And so the immigration issue is something that hits us close to home in terms of both messaging reality, public impression and also on how we will approach this issue. The National Urban League is the oldest and largest economic empowerment and civil rights organization in the country and so this is something that we have always dealt with.

As this most recent immigration discussion and debate has come up, we are very concerned about [benefiting] all of the people that we serve in the Urban League Community throughout the country -- and we serve millions of people every year. So it's very important for us, not just to base our decision making and our approaches and our programs on anecdotal information, or misinformation or to be lead around by persons who do not have our interests in mind as Wade has suggested. There are a number of anti-immigration forces, we see in Congress, for example people who are seeking to get us involved in this issue, but they do not have our interests in mind. They have opposed everything that we have worked on. They opposed voting rights, the extension of the Voting Rights Act. They do not support our programs. They don't support raising minimal wage or any of the other things that we have been working hard to enact in order to improve the conditions of black Americans.

So, we feel that it's very important that we speak up individually as an organization but also as part of this important coalition. And so we really appreciate the opportunity to work together with this coalition to develop a set of principles which we feel should underlie any immigration reform effort. Toward that end we pulled together more than two dozen of the country's civil rights organizations representing minority groups, underserved population, economists, historians and others to develop this set of principles. I wanted to share with you some of the principles that we did agree upon -- principles that we all feel very strongly about and some of which has been talked about by Dr. Berry and Wade.

But these principles will and do guide a lot of our work in this area. Among other things we feel very important to strongly enforce anti-discrimination laws. To establish more open vacancy notification system. To increase the enforcement of workplace standards, that's a very critical element and it's something that really I think does impact a lot of where we are coming out on the current immigration reform efforts. We also strongly feel the need to increase the ability of workers to compete for jobs in other locations. And again, this is something that will provide increased job skills training and adult education opportunities for low-wage job candidates.

That is something that the National Urban League feels very strongly about as we address the problems of low wage workers in this country. It's very important for both the government and private entities to do everything necessary to increase these opportunities. And while certainly the civil rights community doesn't -- may not be completely unified on the issue of a new visa program or the guest worker program -- we all agree that there must be strong labor,

health, wage and public safety or protection. There must be an opportunity for workers to become legal permanent residents.

The National Urban League doesn't believe that the current guest worker program proposed in this legislation comes very close to meeting those criteria. So that is a real problem. But our fundamental position on this is that instead of expressing this issue of immigration as something that will eventually pit minority groups against each other, we focus on improving the conditions of all workers, particularly low wage workers and particularly minority workers. This is not an issue that we should allow ourselves to be pitted against one another in addressing this.

The problems are much too serious. Certainly, immigration obviously is a very important issue. But the issue of the equality gap between whites and blacks and particularly between the problems of low wage workers and minority low wage workers particularly should not be used as an excuse to force through immigration reform efforts that will either do no good or will actually exacerbate many of the problems our country faces. Instead, we are urging Congress and others to focus on solutions that will work. We think it's important to work the problem and not try to divert attention and, among other things, raise the minimum wage, increase funding for second chance programs, increase commitment to and funding for job training programs.

All of these things would do much more to address the problems that we are seeing in our society; be it equality gaps and the racial equality gap, than the efforts to demonize and divide and blame and point fingers. We are very committed at the National Urban League to addressing the problems of all workers, particularly low wage workers. We think the way to do this is to address all of these problems in a comprehensive way with real solutions that we know will work. We need a commitment from the government, from private industry and from communities to really solve these problems and not sweep them under the rug or show concern about them only when on the thirst for political needs.

And so we strongly urge Congress, as they are working through all of these issues, to consider this point of view and to take it seriously and recognize that our voices are very important and that we do have valid concerns, but also very important solutions.

Wade Henderson: Stephanie, thank you very much. The issue of low-wage workers is a perfect segue to our next speaker, Dr. Steven Pitts. Steven.

Dr. Steven Pitts, Economist, Center for Labor Research and Education, University Of California, Berkeley: Thank you. And good morning everybody. Gwen asked me to spend five minutes talking a bit about the economics of the story, and before I do that I want to say a couple of things. First, I think it's really important for the black press that are here to get across that not all black folks are native born and not all immigrants are non black. And a lot of times in discussion we forget that, and I think that is very important to put that point across to people to remember the blacks who are immigrants here; from the Caribbean and from the continent (Africa) and also understand the diversity that exists amongst us as part of the story.

I am from Chicago, originally. My father got to Chicago in the 20's and we read in history there was a big battle around competition between native whites or immigrants and blacks and they called us strike-breakers. And if you look a lot at the attempts to organize workers in Chicago, blacks who used to break the strikes, there was hatred between the races for a lot of reason that were very complicated. But at a certain point in time, the white workers saw that the way they could improve the conditions was to unite and organize with the black workers themselves. And I raise the point just because we see change – as folks mentioned change is coming, we can't stop that. And the question we just raise is, do we want to defend the status quo or try to transform ways that's better for us. This is a very important point to look at because change is coming, and often times we have kind of a competitive approach as if to change our way of life for the detriment. I think we know that status quo doesn't serve us well at all and we need to keep that in mind in our conversation.

I try to avoid defending academics, but I had to a little bit at least about the role of social scientists. A friend of mine said that, 'You know, just because you have sick people at hospitals doesn't mean hospitals make you sick.' Sometimes we have correlation and not causation and that's why it's important that when people see certain things, we talk about why they are occurring, what's causing this to happen. So people go beyond simply their understanding their reality; understand the deeper reality at play as well...We need to address that, but not in the sense of a competitive way. I think that the real issue around economics and immigration, and blacks is the major crisis around jobs in the black community that has not been addressed. There really is a two-dimensional crisis that too often focuses just on the unemployment dimension in the crisis, which is very severe. But what we ignore often times is the very serious dimension of low wage work and when we only focus on employment, we ignore low wage work, we don't address that problem that fuel the flames of the divisiveness.

So first I would say it's the reality of a major job crisis in the black community. And then I would say that the fear to address that crisis well, allows the siege of the competition in this fear because if people aren't paying -- the people in crisis they'll lash out. And without any sort of organizing to transform the situation or to explain their pain and address their pain they lash out at the "other," just as we were the other before we were targets. Black folks will lash out as the "other" -- being immigrants -- because folk aren't addressing the real issue of the job crisis in the black community. From there, it is a problem of racism...So I want to put that out there initially. One way to look at this is that we have a real problem of jobs in our community. A two dimensional crisis there and it's fair to address that crisis that has really caused part of the antagonism.

[Refers to handouts in packet.]

But I want to mark this on some important numbers to reinforce the fact that we have a problem in the black community on jobs. It's been a problem that has existed prior to the rise of immigration. Under the current economic data you see a slide on black and white unemployment ratio, 1959 to 2006. We have got one of several ways to capturing the disparity -- we see consistently this kind of 2:1 ratio between whites and African-Americans. What the chart shows you is that back in 1959, the ratio was around 2.3%, in 2004 it's around 2.3; right? So we can see it's consistent. The problem pre-dates the issue of immigration. What the bottom slide [illustrates] that we saw a result of change in immigration in 1965 which actually took away some of the racial problem that existed prior to '65; we see an increase in immigration. So you see they are starting to see the steady rise in the reporting of our population's foreign born from large migration. But people -- if immigration were some sort of problem you would see some sort exacerbation of these problems of jobs. What do we see? A consistent problem of this 2 to 1 ratio, right, along with the rise of immigration. It didn't get worse, it stayed the same. So we see a problem raised in the labor market that is just not addressed by the question of rising immigration.

The next page gives that in different ways; the same sort of story...You must get two ways of looking at problems in black employment. The first chart shows you in the blue bars. Once again the blue bars is the rise in foreign-born population and the red bars is the black-white employment ratio. What you see once again; the rise in immigration, the steady amount of this races showed by the black-white employment ratio. What the bottom one does, we have once again the same sort of change; the blue bars looking at the change in former population we will see in the red bars our employment rate which you see is all over the map. If there was a direct link between the rise of immigration and black employment rates, you would find a rise in immigration and a rise in employment. You don't find that. This is a very complicated story. But what we see is that often time give the full data -- the full sense of what's actually going on. We need to disconnect black job problems and immigration.

The last couple of slides, same sort of thing. A lot of the research we're doing is trying to focus on the issue of low-wage work and so we have in our next slide different metropolitan areas and we see in these metro areas – those are the top ten metro areas where black folks live -- we see this as a portion of work. Black workers in those areas who are low-wage workers, see it's astronomical; over half the black workers in metropolitan areas work for low wages. You will also see a percentage of immigrant workers, that ratio is once again all over the map. In some cities a lot of immigrants (in LA metropolitan area, in New York) a third of the population is immigrant workers. You see in Baltimore some 6%. But despite this all over the map of the premise of immigrant workers, what do you see? A persistent problem of low wage black workers.

What's very important to get across to your [audiences] is a need to untangle two things. Now that's some quick basic numbers. We hear a lot about these formal stories, and unfortunately people as they take an economics class and get maybe Cs in them and don't get any A's, when you apply the simple story to the complicated stories. So simple stories says, 'well more low wage workers come here, they should drive down the wages.' I mean, that's the simple story. But it does not capture the reality. It assumes that immigrant workers and black workers are kind of employed as equal substitutes.

And so this consensus said that low wage workers come here and reduce our job opportunities and lower wages simply isn't always held up by the facts. One study was done looking at Miami. If you may think back in 1980s, when Fidel [Castro] just said, "get out of my country." We had a massive pushing of Cubans into Miami in 1980. That increased the supply of workers in Miami by about 7%. They found that in Miami at that time there was not any depression of wages as a result of the increased amount of Cubans there. So we actually look at a real world, we don't see these impacts.

One last thing, we know one of our problems is that our people have an incredible rate of incarceration. Now some studies talk in terms of the impact of immigration on low wage worker and blacks. They do all these fancy studies. But no studies have included in the analysis, the impact of incarceration. And so we don't include incarceration. We ignore incarceration. Those studies find that where you have a 10% increase in the amount of low wage workers, you reduce wages by about 3.1%. When you do a good study including the issue of incarceration that affect disappears. We also examine the other real problems we know exists: bad schools, the criminal justice system. That is the problem of the black labor market.

Wade Henderson, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights: Steven, thank you very much. Our final speaker before questions is Alan Jenkins.

Alan Jenkins, Executive Director of the Opportunity Agenda: Thanks Wade and good morning. The Opportunity Agenda is a communications research and advocacy organization. Our mission is building the national will to expand opportunity in American. We've got offices in New York and here in DC and we are on web at opportunityagenda.org. I am going to talk briefly about immigrants, African-Americans, and opportunity and I'll try to abbreviate my remarks a little so that we have plenty of time for questions.

Opportunity is the idea that everyone deserves a fair chance to achieve his or her full potential, that what you look like, where you've come from shouldn't determine your failure or success in our country.

And African-Americans, as you all know, historically have been part of the conscience of our country when it comes to opportunity. We pushed and especially African-American organizations and leadership have pushed our country to fulfill its promise of opportunity for all, never fully achieved it, but we've always been part of the engine behind that. Opportunity for all has always meant something, but not only for the black community; opportunity for all meaning opportunity for everyone. I expect that we are going to continue to be part of that conscience in a new changing, more diverse America that includes new comers as well as native-born folks.

The political discourse in our county frequently, almost always, ask the question of us; does immigration help black folks or does it hurt black folks? And my own view is that's the wrong question. Immigration is a fact. It's not a proposition and as you've heard from all the speakers, immigration and immigrants are not going anywhere and even in the case of the 12 million undocumented immigrants in our country, it would be infeasible to deport them all and it would be inhuman. It would violate our own values in the black communities to do so. And consequently, you see that although African Americans are more likely in polls to say that we believe that immigrants have – family members or ourselves have lost jobs to immigrants we're also less likely to support mass deportation, barring immigrant children from schools, and healthcare and the like. And my own view is that has to do with our value system as a community and also some of the facts that have been described.

So the real question is; how can African Americans and immigrants rise together? One of the solutions – the approach is that we need in order to expand opportunity for everyone in our country instead of fighting over the scraps of a bitter economic pie. In answering that question, I think we have to look to our shared values, our linked faith as African Americans and immigrants, and the solutions that can bring us together across those shared issues. So, I want to talk a little bit about what those common values and interests are and some of the solutions.

Immigrants and African Americans first have a strong and historic shared interest in the stepping stones to opportunity. That is especially true when it comes to education – quality education and affordable healthcare. Again in national polling, immigrants and African Americans rank those two issues as the most important priorities that they have for our country far above what other Americans rank as their most important interest. And we know that in so many schools – urban schools around the country -- the student body is African Americans and immigrants. In the Brooklyn Public School, where my two little girls go – the student body is almost all black. But it's about half immigrants and half native-born African Americans. It has been alluded to that not all immigrants are non-black and not all blacks are native born, and so we have a large population of West Indian immigrants and we have native-born black folks.

We are working together as parents, teachers, educators to solve problems. That's a piece of the story that's often not told, but that speaks powerfully to the shared interest, the reality. This goes also to Dr. Berry's point about the reality that those of us who are living together in communities are actually experiencing shared interest that are manifest in that circumstance.

The second area, I think, is really workplaces that are free of exploitation, the pay or living wage, the deal with many of the issues that Dr. Pitts has noted about low-wage work and the conditions of low-wage work. We have strong dual interests, shared interests in those principles. And as many of you know there are some very interesting local collaborations between African Americans and immigrants emerging in places like Chicago and Oakland and in multiple places in North Carolina where African American workers and immigrant workers are working together to demand fair practices, fair treatment and fair wages. And I think those are some of the most promising examples of where we are coming together across lines of difference.

We have a shared interest as has been said in stepped-up civil rights enforcement. We don't have time unfortunately this morning to get into the details of the ways in which that is not happening and it has not been happening for many years. But the research document very clearly...persistent racial discrimination against African Americans and immigrants in the workplace, in seeking affordable housing, in seeking loans and fair credit, and in the criminal justice system.

Some of the most innovative research in this area is linguistic testing, where people will call seeking the same job, the same opportunity but using different accents including stereotypical but traditional African American accents, Latino, Arab American and otherwise nothing has changed. No qualification has changed; just the accent and what we find is that African Americans and immigrants who have non-English accents or non-American accents are experiencing high levels of discrimination. Here, we have a shared interest once again in stepped up civil rights enforcement.

As you've heard from many of the other speakers, the barriers to opportunity in America for African Americans are not about immigrants. They are about lack of quality education, failure to invest in basic systems of healthcare, affordable housing, a fairness in the criminal justice system and the like. African Americans have a shared interest in tearing down those barriers.

I would say that finally African Americans share with immigrants an interest in immigration reform that includes a pathway to citizenship, earned citizenship as well as human rights for immigrants. And it's not in our interest as African Americans from either a moral standpoint or an economic standpoint to have 12 million undocumented people in our country, without rights subject to exploitation, having to take any job that's given to them for any wage and denied fair conditions.

It's not in our interest morally or economically for that condition to exist. And so recognizing that the status-quo is absolutely unacceptable. The idea that we need comprehensive immigration reform that includes a pathway to earn citizenship and human rights for undocumented as well as documented folks who learn English, who work, who pay taxes, there has to be that pathway and it's in to our benefit as African Americans for that to happen. That needs however to be paired with many of the reforms that you've heard about this morning; with living wage provisions and worker rights, with increased scrutiny and enforcement of workplace protections. It has to be paired with the new reinvestment in systems of education around our country and reauthorization of No Child Left Behind...

Certainly healthcare; we have 47 million people without healthcare in our country and African Americans and the immigrants are the most likely to be without health insurance. It's also true that even when we have insurance, we are the most likely to receive poor treatment and that's been well documented and it's now the fifth anniversary of the National Institute of Medicine Study on equal treatment...that well documented these trends. And nothing has changed in that respect.

We need to bring those solutions together. We need, in essence, an opportunity agenda for our country that serves opportunity for everyone who lives here and I think it's clear that when it comes to that agenda, we are all in it together. I am going to stop there and return to Wade.

Wade Henderson: Alan, thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen, you just heard a panel on Comprehensive Immigration Reform and African Americans: Who Benefits? It's one of the most challenging issues faced by our country today, addressed by panel of informed and eloquent spokespersons. We are happy to be here today and I now turn the panel back to Gwen McKinney.

Gwen McKinney: Thank you -- to all of you -- for this presentation. And now we will give you a chance to weigh in. I do want the operator to know that we will alternate between the audio and the folks in the room. And just because the folks in the room have the advantage of visual queues and the dynamics of body language, I would like to ask the operator to give our telephone audience the first question for any of our panelist. I ask they identify themselves and their news organization.

Q&A

Operator: Ladies and gentlemen, we will now begin the question and answer session. For those of you on the telephone, if you do have a question at this time we ask that you please press the one on your touchtone phone. Would like to take a question from the telephone immediately? Gwen?

Gwen McKinney: Yes.

Operator: Okay. We have a question from Pam Gentry from BET (Black Entertainment Television).

Gwen McKinney: Okay.

Pam Gentry: I wanted to just ask – this can be to any of the panelist if that suits them, is that what about the trend of African Americans moving up in the spectrum in comparison to other immigrants. Usually they have a working class generation and then a middle class and some become entrepreneurs and move up. Have African Americans proceeded, are they behind the curve of immigrants? Are they at the same rate as immigrants? Can you give me some prospective on that?

Dr. Steven Pitts: Give it to me.

Gwen: This is Dr. Steven Pitts speaking.

Dr. Steven Pitts: As Mary Frances Berry alluded to, you can't really compare directly kind of the immigrant experience and the black experience. And so your question kind of talked to some sort of progression where you have when people come here they are poor and they become over time stratified in the community. If you go back to our history, we've had a very stratified black community and so it's not a matter of, well you see a progression of the immigrant community will it have to happen in the black community? We have had a stratified black community and that stratification has been shaped by racism. And so the real question when we talk about the nature of kind of black society, the nature of large entrepreneurial class, nature of our working class, the question is how racism combined with our economic system impacted that development.

Dr. Mary Frances Berry: And now let me try to add on to that, Pam. From a historical prospective that progression, you just talked about, was interrupted for blacks who were here descendents of slaves because we were not able to accumulate capital from working. The immigrant experience is you come, you work, as you described it and then you move up. If you work and you don't get paid for 100s of years and you can't pass it on to your children, you come out a slave rate with not being able to take that next step.

So you've got another 100 years especially with discrimination where you weren't able to, which is one of the things that people who talk about, reparations talk about; here you are starting off. And that's why when Glazer and Moynihan wrote that book, they said we ought to pretend we are immigrants who came in the 1920s. Because they said... you were slaves and then you had Jim Crow and you couldn't accumulate anything. So why don't you just pretend all that didn't happen. I'm exaggerating that's not quite how they said it. And then if you start your experience in the early 20th century, then you can talk about the progression that you just asked about and say we just got here, now we get a job, how long will they take us to move ahead. So, our progression has been disrupted. I guess an economist could tell us though whether since the 1920s that progression, if you were to pretend, hypothetically, that we started off there whether it works or if they could go back and look at some African Americans who were free and the period before the civil war even though they were discriminated against and were able to and then trace

their families and see. But we don't have that answer and so our experience is so different that it's hard to do the comparison.

Dr. Steven Pitts: Just one last point, you can't do the comparison because you know that we had Black Wall Street in Oklahoma...and it was bombed to death. And so prior to the 20s, we had black wealth at some level. So, the question once again is how has racism impacted black development. It's not a matter of the first immigrants simply knowing how precisely what we have done.

Gwen McKinney: Okay, we will open it up to the live group. Any questions?

Lottie Joiner: Hi, I'm Lottie Joiner from The Crisis Magazine and I have several questions, let me go through.

Gwen McKinney: Please just start with one, Lottie.

Lottie: Okay. Well, I will start with Dr. Pitts. You mentioned that there are major job crisis in the black community and the failure to address that crisis causes people to lash out and that the real problem is racism. So, we have to address first the major job crisis in the black community.

And the failure to address that is racism. I guess my question is how are we going to address that just that because it's not immigration...you mentioned several times, it's not immigration, it's the job crisis in the black community. So how are we going to address it, with the underlying racism that continues to exist in society?

Dr. Steven Pitts: Make sure that I am clear. Anyway we try to measure economic performance; blacks do worse than whites. That's the reality we're talking about. And I'm saying that the dominant source of that is racism in our country both historic and contemporary.

And we know from our history how we did [fight back]: we organized -- and given that and given policy, we change the situation. It's the question of how will we then use those same tools today? How do we promote policy, advocacy, to transform that? But also how do we organize because we know the problem isn't a matter of lack of ideas; it's the lack of power. And so from this question of organizing, for policies -- organizing for better things to change in our community. So you look at -- well one problem simply we have racism and the fact that as you mentioned through the different audits on [racial discrimination based on linguistics]... how do we find enforcement to stop this from happening. You know, the problem is that a lot of our children don't have certain skills. They will go through 12 years, get a diploma, and can't pass the exam -- right? Now to totalize, so how do you address that situation where you have [large numbers of black children] not being taught? I mean, even go through the system and get fed into the labor market, you take your system; education, housing, from logistic system how do you transform that? How do you transform that's so you have better outcomes and conditions in the labor market? To do that at all won't be fast and the problem that people are facing.

Dr. Mary Frances Berry: I want to spin on to that one too. First, like what Dr. Pitts said and I'm sure, you know he is the economist, that there is often a nexus between racism and the economics of the situation. For example, Julius Wilson and his students did those studies about Chicago which showed that employees did prefer immigrants to black workers, they did a whole bunch of data sets in which they showed that was the case. There were a lot of reasons for that; employers had stereotypical views about what immigrants would do as opposed to what local blacks would do and would they work hard and they had all kinds of stereotypes in their minds, but they in fact did show that this was the case and that it was even more pronounced if the immigrants were undocumented -- which is one reason why we should want them to be documented -- because then they thought they could exploit them even more.

The other thing is the reason why I think there is some kind of nexus, and I don't know what the answer is, in the data you showed us, Dr. Pitts, you had timelines for blacks twice as likely as whites to be unemployed. But in the 1990s there was a period in which that changed for the first time; when the black unemployment rate was not 2.5 or two more times that of the white.

And I remember it was big news all over the country that it was the first time, for this economic upsurge... And there may have been something that happened in that period. I don't know what happened that caused that the change. That might help us to grapple with this question of the labor market and what to do about black unemployment.

Alan Jenkins: If I can make a quick addition. Civil rights and human right enforcement is key. We know that when there have been periods in which we have invested in the country in addressing discrimination in particular sectors and particular cities, it's been transformative but it's never been sustained and right now and for a the last almost decade it's been on the wane. Take an example like New York City, where there has been a decade long struggle to integrate and create a non discriminatory admissions hiring system for the New York City Police Department and that litigation is beginning again. You note slight changes. But when you see you are looking on the West Coast in the Bay area in, firefighters for instance, there has been significant progress because there has been sustained attention to civil right enforcement and also leadership in many of those cities that really wanted to make a difference. So, you know I just want to make sure that that's also in the mix. Organizing absolutely key; but it needs to be paired with real leadership from government and enforcement.

Gwen McKinney: To manage this so that we can get as much feedback, Operator, I would like to ask those in on the line to ask their question. Operator, can we do that?

Operator: Okay. Ladies and gentlemen, as a reminder once again if you have a question, would you please press the one on your touchtone phone. And we have a question from Kojo Nnamdi from WAMU Radio.

Kojo Nnamdi: Thank you very much. This question is for Mary Frances Berry. Dr. Berry, to what extent do you think that the American phenomenon of fear and loathing of strangers and that is xenophobia, to what extent do you think that phenomenon is what makes the immigration issue such a hot button issue at a time clearly issues like healthcare and the war in Iraq are more important to our everyday existence, and to what extent do you think that we as blacks have bought into that xenophobia especially because now the majority of immigrants are people who speak a different language?

Gwen McKinney: Thank you. Kojo, that was provocative. Another audio question and then we'll take the response and then we'll go back to the live room. Operator?

Operator: Yeah. There's no other questions at this time.

Gwen McKinney: Okay. So then that allows Kojo's question to get answered.

Dr. Mary Frances Berry: Well, since you asked me...I think that the fear and loathing that you talked about of strangers has been true historically with every wave of immigrants. It's cultural, difference, races, language...are they different, are they going to make us, you know, be different? And it's worse now. One of the things that makes it worse is because we are now in a widespread basis using Spanish...You call up somebody about a bill and they say, for Spanish; push one or English push whatever. So it's with everybody all the time and there are people who fear difference, who fear the strangeness, who worry about what's going to happen. The fear and loathing in the past has diminished somewhat as people have come here and been here and have become "assimilated" as whatever color they are, whatever language they speak, and speaking English. This time it's because of the enormity in the numbers, the language issue, the fear especially in some places where they're not used to having immigrants or people speaking any language; and they forgot they don't know how to speak anything except what they speak. So African Americans have, in a sense, bought into it because we are also quintessentially Americans.

Kojo Nnamdi: Thank you.

Dr. Mary Frances Berry: So that whatever else we have got a lot of the other stuff, the bad and the good that white folks demonstrate, we do too. So we've in a sense bought into this too. But I think the language question is a big issue.

Wade Henderson: Kojo I want to add just one thing to it...I mean I think historically Americans, we are country of immigrants but we are afraid of foreigners. I think it's paradoxical, given our history. We have that engrained attitude of schizophrenia, if you will, towards immigration. I think your question about language is reflected in the debate over the immigration bill. There was a pending amendment being offered by Senator Imhoff that would make English the official language of the United States that has a broad but superficial appeal, because many people believe that English should be the dominant language in both commerce and everyday discourse. And yet, they fail to recognize that the adoption of that amendment would prohibit the federal government, for example, from providing ballot material in languages other than English; with services that governments offer and languages other than English. So there are practical consequence that flow from the adoption of an amendment that has that kind of superficial appeal...

Lastly, I think that because our country really emphasizes English and no other language, unlike any other country in the world, our reaction to people who speak languages other than English is sharply different from that of the rest of the world that tends to be much more bilingual, speaking many languages as a part of the nature of what they do.

Gwen McKinney: Okay. Open to the floor to questions.

Shari Logan: Hi, Shari Logan, NNPA [National Newspaper Publishers' Association]. For the whole panel, and especially Dr. Pitts, I am thinking we talked about how the lack of jobs for African Americans is not necessarily because of immigrants, but because of the lack of maybe skills or education. So we live in a country where a lot of our African Americans are going to school systems where they are not being prepared. What do we do to improve the education system, what programs do we bring into a community that will train them? What do we do then?

Alan Jenkins: First of all, certainly lack of skills and a poor investment by our society in education for African-American kids is important. As you have heard, discrimination still plays a very important role in these multiple things that we need to address. There's now a lot of knowledge about what's needed to open up educational opportunity in our country. It requires equal and adequate school funding, it requires smaller class sizes and it requires real investment in things that are often unfortunately seen as luxuries like art education and music, but also math and science labs and the like. And we know that, as author Jonathan Kozol has written, savage inequalities exist between rich and poor districts, between black, white and other communities of colors' schools. So we need to fix that school finance, which is being attempted in many places. Many states have suits on these issues that have been relatively successful. We need to invest in those basic class size issues, quality teachers and making sure that we pay teachers adequately to do the job they are called upon. As it has been mentioned, adult education and retraining is very important. So many of us in the civil rights community fought to get African-Americans a fair shot at jobs in the manufacturing sector, and then the manufacturing sector went away because of globalization and other dynamics. So we need to be thinking ahead, we need to know where those new jobs are and we need to make sure that we are preparing our kids and adults for those jobs.

Dr. Steven Pitts: I want to add one more thing. A lot of times when we look at job issues, we focus on one side of the story: the individual. And we focus on the need to be trained better, more access, and more opportunity. We need to balance that kind of perspective by looking at the other kind of stories as well toward the structure of the economy. If you think of our economy as kind of big job machine that spits out jobs everyday, it'd spit out a lot of bad jobs which are independent of people's skills. If you look at a lot of the growing industries, you see a bifurcated occupational structure.

We have some good jobs; most people with skills get those jobs, and a whole bunch of bad jobs. I think that beyond looking simply at what the individuals need to do, we just see how we can transform that job machine. Somehow we see better jobs being set out and what's been useful in transforming jobs has been public policy, minimum wages, greater floor. We require all firms to pay more, we have union organizing that gives working people more powers and they get better wages. More cities have living wages laws being passed. I think that, in addition to examining how we improve the opportunities for individuals and their skills, we look at how we alter the structure of the economy that we walk into.

Wade Henderson: I just want to add one point to your question. I think the question has greater urgency than sometimes we in the broader subordinate community show. The truth is we are 53 years from the Supreme Court's transformative decision in Brown versus the Board of Education, and Brown has done many, many things to help transform society. But we often put too much weight on the back of that one decision to think that some how it would transform what is three centuries of discrimination that is engrained by structure, and that is often very difficult, but not impossible, to do. Secondly, 53 years ago, we had the promise of access to education, and yet today by any measure the 50% dropout rate in both the black and Latino community suggests that we have not been affected by any measure in ensuring the quality education for the majority of our people. As a result of statistics that Dr. Pitts alluded to, which shows a structural low wage workforce composed primarily of the poor immigrant population, African-Americans, and Latinos, is something that has to be of concern to all of us. Within the next three weeks we are soon to be visited with two Supreme Court decisions looking at voluntary efforts by school boards in Louisville and Seattle to ensure integrated, diverse student bodies as a way of helping to spread quality public education. We don't know how the Supreme Court will rule, but I generally suspect that we are going to have to respond to those decisions in an extremely aggressive, affirmative way.

Judith Kabango: American Urban Radio Network. I want to know what you would say to an African American who is living in the reality that Dr. Berry pointed out before that they see immigrants taking their jobs and that this is not really the case; that there are more factors going into it. I also wanted to know which amendments are helpful to the immigrant debate in terms of helping African Americans.

Wade Henderson: For those African Americans who may hear the Congressional debate, may hear the policy debate, read the newspapers, and see the TV who fear that passage of the immigration bill will somehow put them in worse positions than they are right now, I urge them to look around in the absence of the bill that's being passed. They are confronting a reality that suggests they are already being affected by continued flows of undocumented immigration.

If Congress fails to enact a comprehensive bill, the status quo continues and their perception is likely to worsen because it is likely that the federal government will not address this issue for at least another three years. From the perspective of those of us in the civil rights community; there is an urgency to this question, but it is not related exclusively to immigration reforms. It goes to the larger questions that both Dr. Berry, Dr. Pitts and my friend Alan Jenkins alluded to with respect to structural impediments that make advancement opportunities more difficult in American society without adequate civil rights enforcements; where there has been indifference bordering on unaccountability when it comes to the interests of African Americans. We have to raise our voices more clearly, be more aggressive and organize more effectively, which is one of the reasons that we are trying to extend our reach to other communities that suffer from similar problems in order to build coalitions that will make us more effective in responding to those issues.

Judith Kabango: Okay. Thank you.

Amy Alexander: Hi, Amy Alexander from NPR [National Public Radio]. Just about everyone on the panel has mentioned organizing and I am just curious like, in real terms, what examples of that you might have in mind. I mean a lot of what we are discussing here is kind of taking place up here, and we understand that organizing has the best chance of affecting policy as policy is affected by voting. But, as Judith pointed out on the ground, the perception may be a case of perception versus reality and folks not having information. But the truth is black people everywhere are feeling that immigration is only going to harm them. I am surprised none of you mentioned proposition 187.

Wade Henderson: 187, sure.

Amy Alexander: From LA a few years ago. I am from California...

Wade Henderson: Yeah.

Amy Alexander: ...and regular walking around people will tell you in a heartbeat, "I can't get a job in a hotel because they would rather hire a Mexican who will work for much less than I will." And whether or not they're uninformed, that is the perception. Why would a regular walking around brother throw in with a coalition of other people that they feel is harming their chance?

Dr. Mary Frances Berry: It's also true there are tensions between Latino groups and African-American groups in certain communities, which we don't talk about but they exist. And the people on the ground see this. So when you start talking to them about these issues they just reflect their own experience. You might say that they shouldn't; they should go read Steve Pitt's work...

Amy Alexander: Right.

Dr. Mary Frances Berry: ...and sit down and think about it overnight, but they are reflecting what they feel...

Amy Alexander: Right.

Dr. Mary Frances Berry: ...and what they see.

Amy Alexander: So how do you...

Dr. Mary Frances Berry: One answer is the one that Wade gave, but I think what you have to emphasize is, "Yes, I see what you see." Don't tell them you don't see it because then they won't listen to you. But the reality is that, one; these people are going to keep coming, and two; if they are illegal they are going to undercut you even more. So you want them to be legal so they won't undercut you so much. Although, they might answer you by saying, "But then they can vote and then they will be voting all our people out." It's a catch 22...but if you give them the moral argument and you give them the idea that we should be a coalition together so that if they do vote that we can work together on issues and that the studies all show that if they are illegal they undercut you even more. So that reality you see is going to be worse.

Amy Alexander: I guess that but where is it happening?

Wade Henderson: I am going to let my colleagues respond to that, and I want to respond to it too. Alan?

Alan Jenkins: Just quickly two points. First of all, it's actually not true that most black folks are against pathways to citizenship. Seventy percent of black folks consistently say they are in favor of pathways to earned citizenship for immigrants. It is true, however, that not only in our community, people who are against it are the loudest, right? You are most likely to hear from those people who are angry about the immigration situation, and that's not to say we are not conflicted. That we don't disagree in our community; we don't have real ambivalence. But in terms of this specific question of, "Do we as a community support a pathway to citizenship for 12 million undocumented immigrants?" the answer is yes, by large margins. But I completely agree with what's been said that we can't deny the ambivalence and concern, and a lot of it is real and legitimate for us. To speak to your second question about where is that actually happening? I can get you more specific nitty gritty details, but I can tell you that, for instance, in New York, where I live, we just weathered a hospital closing commission. The hospitals that people feared would be slated for closure are predominantly in black and immigrant communities. People have been working together to try to stop the hospital closings in places like Southeast Queens, which is one of the most diverse places on Earth, where Jamaica, Queens is, but is also a heavily African-American neighborhood.

Folks are working together on that issue. I mentioned my own kids' school where we are all working together to solve the problem. If you look at the unions UNITE HERE and SEIU, and their particular struggles...and these are unions that are overwhelmingly immigrant and African American. And folks are working together to save jobs, to produce wages that are livable, and to deal with conditions for folks. Returning to New York, you remember the subway strike in which a black immigrant, Roger Toussaint, was the leader of that movement. And these are all examples of where folks from our different communities are working together to try to seek justice and opportunity. But the last thing I will say is it's up to all of you to help to tell those stories because they are not always the most sensational ones, but they absolutely need to be told. And telling them will help to change the dynamic more towards the reality rather than the apocryphal.

Wade Henderson: Amy, I just wanted to add a couple of specific examples though, because I think, for some, perception is reality in politics and in life.

Amy Alexander: Yes.

Wade Henderson: I think we are trying to address both perception and reality. Take Los Angeles. In the hotel industry there is certainly the perception that there has been a mass migration out of employment of African Americans and black workers and now a preference for Latinos in jobs that were previously held by blacks. The union that represents hotel workers is UNITE HERE. Bruce Raynor, the head of this union, has helped to create a program that requires hotels to recruit black workers. The union helps in that effort as a way trying to respond to the perception and reality of jobs that may have changed. There is an effort on the part of the broad civil rights communities, which includes black organizations, Latino organizations and many others to support legislation. Now that the employees have free choice set, that makes it easier for unions to organize workers in a way that responds to some of the problems that they now face. Barriers that employers have created, and enforcement laws have created, makes it worse. The Supreme Court, for example, came down with a decision in 2002 in the Hoffman Plastic case dealing with this question of whether undocumented workers would be able to sue employers for bad wages. The argument is that if you have undocumented workers, and they can be exploited by employers who decide to simply dismiss them after they have done the work, they will always have a preference for them over black workers. So we are now supporting legislation to overturn that decision. The whole purpose here is that we are not trying to offer this as a soft to the unions. The truth is that the workers who will benefit are primarily low-wage black and Latino workers who have marginal educational achievements for whom the union provides the best opportunity to get healthcare, to get benefits and to have steady employment. So this is self interest rightly understood and I think we operate under the model, "Look at you. You want a friend, you've got to be a friend."

That means taking a look at how interests come together and diverge to establish a new reality for how you have to change concerns.

Dr. Steven Pitts: If you really examine our history, folks went up from the south throughout the Midwest. Those jobs, if you had a good job and weren't good at school, was a union job. Nothing inherent in an auto-worker job makes it a good paying job. The union made it a good job. So the idea of how do you transform it; to change the high pay better jobs, is you organize for that. It's important, as Wade said, we are not just trying to help people do better in office. These are workers who try to improve the situation of black workers doing that, and we know we do that through organizing.

Gwen: Okay. Now, I want to get everyone who had questions. I think, I saw Herb and Joseph. Any other questions? Because what I would like you to do is to raise the question, be as brief as you can when you formulate it and say who you want to direct it to. And I want the answer from our panelists to be as concise as possible as well, so we can get to other questions.

Herbert Lowe: Herbert Lowe from the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. Trying to be concise, I hear President Bush saying a lot that the reason we need to somehow find the way to keep the workers here, the undocumented workers here, is because they do jobs that Americans won't do any more. I am wondering if you are saying that blacks have risen to a level where there are jobs they won't do anymore. And so we need these folks, and if that is true is that a good thing? Should we take some measure of comfort in that? Second, you stated Mr. Jenkins, you pointed to the media and said it was up to us...up to the media to get your information out there.

Alan Jenkins: Now that I didn't say.

Herb Lowe: Well, that's why I made it clear. Because you said the loudest are the ones that we hear from, and they don't seem to have trouble doing it. How is it that we get beyond briefings without a level of organizing because you need the leadership, I guess. And how is that?

Wade Henderson: I think there are jobs that African Americans and for that matter other workers won't take. I want to give you an example though, that is concrete about the difficulty of getting jobs filled even by black workers. The Washington Post had a front page story yesterday about efforts on Maryland's Eastern Shore to perpetuate an industry of crab pickers. Maryland's Eastern Shore is famous for its blue crabs. It's an industry that keeps that section of the state operational.

The story focused on the fact that workers who fill the jobs of picking crabs out of the claws are some of the lowest paid workers in that community. They make roughly \$15,000 for seasonal work of nine months.

The job requires them to sit in a steel chair for up to nine hours as they pick bits of crab out of claws. Obviously it's a dirty job. You smell of crabs and you get very little in the way of dollars. The owner of the crab picking facility had made an effort to go to Baltimore to recruit workers who would go to city facilities to get workers from the state that they had approved. He would try to recruit men who had simply come of prison and were looking for job opportunities. He made a major sweep to try to get workers, by implication black workers, to fill these jobs. People were not prepared to take these jobs for the wages for which they were being paid... trying to encourage workers in the black community to do these jobs. The only people that would take these jobs were guest workers from Mexico, and that's who he was recruiting. That's an example of the fact that for the dollars being paid no one is going to take those positions other than guest workers who see that as a real opportunity. That's just one example. It doesn't mean that you are not going to be able to find workers.

I thought Dr. Pitts made an excellent point when he raised the question of the previously incarcerated. They are coming out, many of these men and women are functionally illiterate, without the ability to be able to do jobs that require some level of educational attainment and comprehension. And to expect individuals to, from those circumstances, take jobs like crab picker jobs that pay \$15,000 with no benefits for nine months seasonal employment is something that I would be interested in knowing. So I think it's a much more complex problem.

Alan Jenkins: If you heard me to say that journalists somehow have a responsibility to tell anyone's particular story then I misspoke. That certainly wasn't my point. My point though, in response to Amy's question, was that the stories are out there of immigrant and African American communities working together to solve problems. It's certainly our job as advocates to get that information to you all to tell it. It's also true, and this was really my point, that the black press has a historic truth telling role and has always been at the forefront in telling stories that were not being told, especially when it comes to justice and problem solving. And so it's really a call for us all to work to get those stories out. But again, my point is certainly not that you all somehow have a responsibility to tell any one particular story.

Wade Henderson: I want to speak to the question of leadership, because you asked that as a concluding question. First of all, the fact that we initiated the briefing as leaders of multiracial communities, but the African American community in particular, is an indication that we in the civil rights movement see this issue as one which African Americans have full responsibility and an interest in trying to lead. We at the Leadership Conference have convened what we call "under the radar meetings" between Latino, African American and Asian American leaders to talk about the questions of immigration reform. We convene meetings of some of the highest level leaders in all three communities to talk about how our interests converged, how they diverged and how we could develop strategies to work more effectively together on a range of issues.

We have also convened meetings between those communities and the labor movement to talk about how we can provide assistance to one another on important questions that are part of the debate on immigration reform. From legalization to this question of guest workers and whether there should be a program. We recognize that there is a responsibility to try to forge new alliances, to try to organize more effectively, to try to exercise political power...failure to do that means at the end of the day we will compromise opposition even more.

Gwen McKinney: Joseph, I know you had a question.

Unidentified Speaker: My name is Joe Young and I'm with the Washington Informer. And I have several question about...

Gwen McKinney: Well, you can make it real concise because after you we'll take one more. Thank you.

Unidentified Speaker: (Inaudible) economic and political issues in the black communities (inaudible)?

Wade Henderson: First of all, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, which is the organization I head, does have a position on immigration reforms. I testified before the House Judiciary Committee on the question of comprehensive immigration reform. My testimony is included in the packets of material. There is a transcript of that hearing in which I engage members of that committee in a vigorous debate over the question of whether or not immigration reform adversely affected the interest of Black Americans, and I believe that I reflect the views that were discussed here. Secondly, the arguments that we make with respect to African-American involvement in the immigration debate are not more realistic. They are comprehensive in one sense. We view any policy question from the perspective of self interest rightly understood. You've got to address questions that affect your direct interests in a comprehensive and meaningful way. Certainly African Americans are the conscience of the nation with respect to the rights and responsibilities of our country to live up to the commitment that it has made to all citizens. We understand what it's like to be outside of the body politic. I need not remind you how we got here. I need not remind you of decisions like Dred Scott in 1856; a decision that said black people had no rights outside of the body politic. I think we do practice what I call underdog politics. We do identify with those who face oppression and discrimination similar to our own, but I don't think that blinds us to economic and political realities.

And I think we respond to interests in ways that address those economic and political concerns. We speak to issues that I think are done in a comprehensive way to try to present the views of the communities that we represent.

Stephanie Jones: The National Urban League does have a position on immigration, but it is within the context of our overall issues because we see the immigration issue and the immigration debate as something much broader. We have developed this within a set of principles that we apply to any issue related to immigration and some of the principles I touched on earlier, but issues of ensuring fairness for workers, fair wages, raising the minimum wage, promoting job training, education, universal pre-K, a number of factors that we think should be addressed in order to directly impact and improve the conditions of African American in ways that some of the discussions about immigration issue and it's impact on African American doesn't really get to. We had not previously taken a position on the most recent immigration reform bill, but we have recently. We do oppose the bill, but it's primarily because of our concern about the guest worker program and the fact that it creates, at least in it's present form, a dead-end system that will lead to not only exploitation, but also that could impact African American workers and other low wage workers. But I think it's very important as we as an organization talk about the immigration issue that it be framed within the larger context and not just focus on pitting one minority group against another. As Dr. Pitts pointed out, immigrants aren't all one race. We have a number of black immigrants from the Caribbean, from Africa, and we can't just put one face on immigration. We are not going to buy into the notion of demonization, blaming and finger pointing. We need to look at the broader issue and determine what is best for the constituency we serve. And we strongly believe that that is the set of prescriptions that I laid out earlier in terms of job training and increasing job opportunities and educational opportunities for African Americans, which will benefit all low wage workers and workers as a whole.

Gwen McKinney: Thank you very much, Stephanie. I would like to thank all of you for coming. To our telephone audience, thank you very much. If you would like to follow-up you can reach the panelists through us and their contact information is included in the packages with much of the information that was discussed. I would also like to invite you all to partake of the breakfast that people didn't get, now, at lunch time.

Stephanie Jones: You also mentioned that the audio would be available.

Gwen McKinney: Yes. It may take a day, and we will also have the transcript. We do have to edit the transcript, but we will have the transcript available online and the audio feed will be online probably within the day or earlier. Please contact Muriel Cooper or Malaika Robinson, who are here if you need to follow, up or me. Thank you very much. Thank you so much for coming.

Wade Henderson: Thank you.

Operator: This ends the conference call for today. We thank you for participating.