

many families is Andy Mercier, who leads Merchants Foodservice in Hattiesburg. In partnership with the Mississippi Food Network, his 800 employees have remained on the payroll and worked to provide more than 100,000 gallons of milk and nearly half a million food produce boxes to those in need.

These USDA Farmers to Families boxes filled with food products from Mississippi farmers and producers have sustained families and helped our hard-hit agricultural industry.

In addition to efforts in the private sector, our churches and nonprofits across our State are also working tirelessly for Mississippians. St. James United Methodist Church in Columbus coordinated with a Delta catfish producer to distribute five tons of Mississippi farm-raised catfish to those in need in the Golden Triangle region.

Finally, I could not stand up here today and fail to mention our Mississippi teachers, especially as so many schools across our State are beginning the new academic year this month.

Last spring, our teachers accepted the challenge and quickly transitioned their classrooms to a new kind of learning through technology and other socially distanced means. While those challenges continue as schools navigate how best to serve students this fall, each and every one of our teachers will be in my prayers over the next few weeks.

In every facet of our society, we have heroes standing up to help their neighbors during unprecedented challenges. To all of the healthcare workers and first responders on the frontlines against this virus, to all the researchers racing to test treatments and develop protocols, to all of the people making hand sanitizers and PPE to help prevent the spread of this virus, to all the bankers and small businesses working to keep people on the payroll, to all of our farmers, ranchers, food distributors, and grocery store workers keeping food on the store shelves and on our tables, to all of our churches and nonprofit organizations serving our communities, and to our teachers who are facing challenges they could have never imagined, from the bottom of my heart, I say thank you. Your heroic labors are noticed, and they are greatly appreciated.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Iowa.

COVID-19 HEROES

Ms. ERNST. Mr. President, I want to thank my colleagues today—the Senator from Mississippi, the Senator from Kansas, and so forth—for coming down and spending just a little bit of time talking about the wonderful heroes we have in our home States, and we really do have so, so many of them.

While the country is anxiously awaiting Washington to come together and pass an updated COVID relief package,

we are truly blessed to have everyday heroes back in our 50 States who are working around the clock to help out their neighbors.

Essential workers haven't taken a break. They have been keeping our country running—and not just during this global pandemic but every single day. I have heard, time and again, stories of Iowans helping Iowans. Folks are volunteering their time and their talents to serve their communities and ensure no one feels alone during this time of social distancing.

When my friend Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds announced that there was a shortage of face masks to protect frontline workers, Iowans, including my own mother, started sewing.

Deb Siggins of Lisbon, IA, has made more than 400 masks that she has donated to a local hospital, her friends, and coworkers, the local fire department, grocery store employees, and elderly patients. She has even turned a tree near her home into a “giving tree” decorated with her homemade masks for people to take, which she is constantly updating. Deb plans to keep making the masks until they are no longer needed because she believes that sewing is her gift from God, which she can use to help others.

Mary Shotwell of Des Moines wanted to give back to those helping her during this pandemic. In “i-sew-lation,” as she describes it, Mary sewed masks for her entire neighborhood and healthcare workers at Broadlawns Medical Center.

In addition to the demand for masks, there has also been an increased need for food, especially to feed our hungry kiddos. Linn-Mar teacher Carla Ironside, who hasn't seen her students in the classroom since March, now sees some of them when they pick up meals at Feeding Lunches to Youth in Marion and Cedar Rapids, where she volunteers. Carla says the opportunity to serve these meals helps calm her anxious mind, knowing her students are fed. She said: “I get to see their smiles . . . and it helps me, and I think it helps them.”

But it is not just our wonderful teachers; students are doing their part too. Allie Stutting of Princeton, IA, who is a University of Iowa student, launched an effort to mobilize her peers to serve and protect those at heightened risk. Worried about the threat COVID posed to her grandparents and the elderly, Allie set up a network of young people called the Iowa City Errand-ers to get groceries and food, pick up prescriptions, and run other errands for older folks and others in need. Allie's idea has inspired an army of over 400 volunteers—yes, 400 volunteers, folks.

The story of these everyday heroes continues. To keep those who are venturing out safe, ambassadors from Operation Downtown are walking around Des Moines, cleaning and sanitizing handrailings, door handles, parking meters, and other high-touch surfaces.

Julie Skalberg, an Operation Downtown ambassador, explains that it is an

effort to help folks feel secure during what can be a very scary time.

Despite the potential risk, Cynthia Allen—another Operation Downtown ambassador—says she feels that it is an honor to give back to our community.

Folks, the actions of these and many, many others like them who are pitching in and doing their part are examples of what I like to call “Iowa Nice.” For each of them, serving others is not a chore but, rather, a gift greeted with gratitude.

At a time filled with immeasurable uncertainty, these heartland heroes are bringing comfort to their communities, including complete strangers, many who are isolated and alone.

Defeating this virus will require the development of an effective vaccine, and Iowa is helping to lead the way in this effort. Right now, the hard-working folks at the University of Iowa's Medical School are working with Pfizer to develop a COVID-19 vaccine. In the annual Defense bill that recently passed the Senate, I helped increase funding for these types of studies and developments.

The efforts of our bright young Iowa college students, combined with the work of Operation Warp Speed and the administration, provide great hope for the future development of cures, treatments, and vaccines. Now, as we wait for the results, let's not forget the hope that the stories of our everyday COVID heroes bring. It is the Iowa way: stepping up and doing your part—meeting the needs of family, friends, and even strangers.

Folks, I have said it before, and I will say it yet once again here today: We will get through these challenging times, and we will do it together.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Iowa.

Ms. ERNST. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I have come to the floor again today to speak about an obscure section of immigration law that has a direct impact on the lives of literally millions of people living and working in the United States. I am here to speak about the plight of immigrant workers who are suffering because of a serious problem in our immigration system, known as the green card backlog. Many of these immigrants are essential workers helping to lead the fight against COVID-19. We have just heard tributes on the floor to these healthcare heroes from Senators on the other side.

This green card backlog, which I speak to, puts them and their families at risk of losing their immigration status and being deported from the United States. Under current law, there are not nearly enough immigrant visas—also known as green cards—available each year. As a result, many immigrants are stuck in crippling backlogs for years, waiting and praying for the moment when their number comes up.

Close to 5 million future Americans are in line, waiting for these green cards, including 1 million immigrant workers and their families. Despite this number—5 million—there are only 226,000 family green cards and 140,000 employment green cards available each year.

These backlogs are really hard on families. They are caught in immigration limbo. What happens to the children is particularly awful. Children in many of these families age out while the parents are waiting for the green cards. What does that mean? They reach the age of 21, and then these children, as adults, face deportation because they are no longer under the age of 21 by the time the green cards are available.

The solution to the green card backlog is so clear: Increase the number of green cards. I have introduced legislation known as the RELIEF Act with Senator PAT LEAHY and Senator MAZIE HIRONO. The RELIEF Act would increase the number of green cards to clear the backlogs for all immigrants waiting in line for green cards within 5 years. The RELIEF Act would protect aging out children who qualify for a green card based on the parents' immigration petition.

This RELIEF Act is not new; it is based on the bipartisan 2013 Comprehensive Immigration Reform bill. I know a little bit about it. That bill was written by eight Senators, and I was one of them—four Democrats, four Republicans. We worked for months. We took the bill through the Senate Judiciary Committee. We faced 200 amendments, I believe, and then brought it to the floor, subject to even more amendments. At the end of the day, that bill passed with a strong bipartisan vote of 68 to 32 on the floor of the Senate. But Republicans, who controlled the House of Representatives, refused to even consider this comprehensive immigration bill. If they had, we wouldn't be here today. That bill and the provisions we added to it eliminated the green card backlog.

Unfortunately, some of my colleagues on the Republican side are still unwilling to increase the number of immigrant visas even by one. They want to keep these immigrant workers on temporary visas where they are at risk of losing their immigration status and being deported.

The senior Senator from Utah, Mr. LEE, introduced a bill, S. 386, known as the Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act, to address the green card backlog. I have a basic concern with

Senator LEE's bill. S. 386 includes no—no—additional green cards.

Without additional green cards, S. 386 will not reduce the green card backlog. Don't take it from me; listen to the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service. Here is what they say about Senator LEE's legislation: "S. 386 would not reduce future backlogs compared to current law."

This is not a partisan group; it is the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service. S. 386 would not reduce future backlogs.

Despite my concerns about Senator LEE's bill, I told him I was willing to sit down and work in good faith to see if there was something we could agree on. Last December, we reached an agreement—a good one.

Republicans object to increasing the number of green cards, and, as a result, even our agreement—the amendment we agreed to—wouldn't reduce the green card backlog. But it was a good bill that we proposed.

Let me highlight two key provisions of this agreement. We protect immigrants and their families stuck in the backlog. Immigrant workers and their immediate family members would be allowed to "early file" for their green cards. This was a proposal from Senator LEE that I thought was good and I was willing to support. That doesn't mean they would receive their green cards early, but they would be able to switch jobs and travel without losing their immigration status. That, to me, was only sensible.

Early filing adds a critical protection that was not in Senator LEE's original bill. It prevents the children of immigrant workers from aging out of green card eligibility so they will not face deportation while they are waiting for a green card.

Our agreement also would crack down on the abuse of H1-B temporary work visas. The amendment we agreed to would prohibit a company from hiring additional H1-B workers if the company's workforce were more than 50 employees and more than 50 percent of them were temporary workers.

These shell companies were created for outsourcing Americans jobs and abusing the H1-B visa process. I know because Senator GRASSLEY—Republican of Iowa—and I introduced this reform years and years ago when this abuse became so obvious. It targets the top recipients of H1-B visas, which are outsourcing companies that use loopholes in the law to exploit immigrant workers and to offshore American workers' jobs.

Two weeks ago, I came to the floor of the Senate to ask that we pass this agreement. Unfortunately, at that moment, Senator LEE objected. Instead, he offered a revised version of our December agreement, including changes that are required by the Trump administration.

First, Senator LEE wants to remove a provision known as the hold harmless clause. That assured immigrants who

are already waiting for a green card—sometimes for years—would not lose their place in line because Congress changed the rules in the middle of the game.

Second, Senator LEE wanted to delay for 3 years the effective date of this 50-50 rule to crack down on outsourcing companies. I don't believe we should give these companies that are outsourcing American jobs and exploiting immigrant workers a free pass for 3 years.

Third, Senator LEE wanted to delay for years early filing for people who are stuck in the green card backlog. Any children who would age out in the meantime would lose their chance for a green card and be subject to deportation.

Those changes suggested by the Senator from Utah were unacceptable, but because there are so many lives at stake here, families at stake here—and I know the intensity of emotion behind this issue—I was determined to keep working to see if we could find some common ground.

Last Tuesday, I sent Senator LEE another compromise offer. The Senate Republican leader is planning to recess the Senate in a few days, so I thought it was important to come to the floor today to try to pass this proposal before the Senate convenes.

Let me be clear. This isn't how we are supposed to make laws in the Senate. Last year, I sent a letter—joined by every Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee—to the senior Senator from Texas, JOHN CORNYN, chair of the Immigration Subcommittee. We asked for the regular order of business in the Senate, which so seldom occurs now. We asked Senator CORNYN, as chair of the Immigration Subcommittee, to hold a hearing on this complicated legislation that addresses the green card backlog. We wanted them to include in the hearing consideration of Senator LEE's bill and my legislation, the RELIEF Act. We requested a hearing with witnesses, a markup, a bill, a vote in the committee, and a vote on the floor. It is almost like something called the U.S. Senate used to be. This would help the Senate to understand, during the course of this hearing and debate, the impact of each of these proposals and to pass legislation that would actually fix the backlog. That really is how the Senate used to work. I know it is hard for newer Members to believe it.

The Immigration Subcommittee is certainly not too busy to take up this hearing. For this session of Congress, which began a year and a half ago, the Immigration Subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee has held one hearing—one.

Unfortunately, Senator CORNYN rejected our request. This leaves me no other option but to bring this proposal directly to the Senate floor.

Let me explain what my amendment would do.

First, it would ensure that the children of immigrant workers do not age

out while waiting for a green card. This provision would not increase the number of green cards. It would not provide any special benefits. It would simply allow children of immigrant workers to keep their place in line for a green card and to be protected from deportation until they can get their green card.

Second, my amendment would delay the bill section that changes the distribution of green cards by 1 year. This provision, which Senator LEE actually proposed earlier this year, would not replace the hold-harmless provision; however, it would allow processing time for immigrants with pending applications to get their green cards.

Third, my amendment would allow for immediate implementation of the 50-50 H-1B visa rule. I was told that the purpose of delaying it 3 years was to protect those currently working for these companies. So instead of the 3-year delay, my amendment would exempt renewals for current H-1B employees, which gives current employees the chance to apply for early filing without creating a loophole for outsourcing firms.

What I offered Senator LEE after months and months of deliberation and negotiation was a good-faith effort to find common ground. There are so many lives at stake. So many families are following this debate because it literally will decide the fate of each of these individuals who are applying for the green cards and members of their family.

It is heartbreaking to meet these families who have been waiting for years for a green card and to realize that the limitations of our system today make it so difficult. Many of these are good, hard-working people in America who are doing the right thing.

In my hometown of Springfield, IL, there are physicians whom I have met and talked to personally who have driven hundreds of miles to plead their case with me. This one physician brought his young daughter; I think she was about 12 years old. I haven't forgotten her to this day. She traveled 200 miles to beg me to try to help. That is why I came in with this amendment in an effort to protect her and give her family a chance to be part of America's future.

I will now request unanimous consent to pass my amendment.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Judiciary Committee be discharged from further consideration of H.R. 1044 and the Senate proceed to its immediate consideration; further, that the Durbin substitute amendment at the desk be considered agreed to; the bill, as amended, be considered read a third time and passed; and the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table with no intervening action or debate.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. COTTON). Is there objection?

The Senator from Utah.

Mr. LEE. Mr. President, reserving the right to object, I want to thank and

appreciate the work done by my friend, my distinguished colleague, the senior Senator from Illinois.

Senator DURBIN and I have worked on many issues. We spent a lot of time working on this particular bill. In our most recent round of negotiations, he made a number of suggestions, and we incorporated many of those. I wish we could incorporate all of them.

For the reasons that I gave a couple of weeks ago when we went through this, there are some of them that I unfortunately can't agree to because they would result in our inability to proceed. On that basis, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

The Senator from Utah.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST

Mr. LEE. Mr. President, we are living in some really unprecedented times. The economic impact of this global pandemic on our Nation, our people, and our communities has been nothing short of devastating. Within weeks of the start of this pandemic, we went from being one of the best economies that the world has ever seen to some of the deepest levels of unemployment we have ever seen.

While the unemployment rate improves each month, countless Americans are still suffering from business closures, from layoffs, and from furloughs.

Ultimately, the best economic stimulus we can offer in this hour of need is to foster opportunities for Americans to find meaningful work and to achieve economic independence. We have to ensure that our immigration system does not punitively disadvantage our own citizens from working in their chosen field, does not create unnecessary obstacles to achieving economic independence, and that it does not unnaturally depress wages.

I echo President Trump's bold call to put America's interests first as we work toward economic recovery.

During this economic crisis, the Tennessee Valley Authority, a federally owned entity, made the decision to furlough its American workers and replace them with contractors who rely on work-based immigrant labor. Many of these same outsourcing companies are able to conduct operations for far less money because they pay immigrant workers below market wages and require them to work, in some circumstances, under terrible conditions.

It was never the intention of any employment-based visa program to crowd out American workers in this way or to allow for the exploitation of legal immigrant workers. I fully support President Trump in making that clear in his actions earlier this week.

Let me be clear. This legislation, S. 386, Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act, does not add a single green card or additional visa to the current numbers. No. It only lifts the per-country caps on applications for green cards

for immigrants who are already here. So it doesn't add to the number; it just lifts this artificial, arbitrary per-country cap.

In times of high unemployment, if we need to reform other work-based immigration programs that protect American workers, let's do it. If we need to end the optional practical training program to ease the burden on American graduates entering the economy, let's do it. If we need to reform the H-1B program and make significant reductions in the number of work-based immigrants who come into this country, let's talk about that.

I support these reforms, and that is why I worked with Senators GRASSLEY and DURBIN, among so many others in this body, to add significant reforms to the H-1B program, to the Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act. This includes a reduction in the number of work-based visa holders that any one company may lawfully sponsor. This reform, included at Senator DURBIN's request, is a good one, and it aims to protect not only American workers but immigrants as well by significantly curbing the system that allows for both the exploitation of visa holders and the depression of wages for all employees in a given sector. Its passage into law will increase the opportunity for Americans to compete for these positions.

The bill also includes provisions strengthening the Department of Labor's ability to enforce and investigate claims that employers are providing less than fair wages and working conditions for immigrant workers, requiring employers to disclose more information regarding their H-1B hiring practices and ensuring that employers may not use other visas to circumvent the H-1B caps.

We must put Americans first. These provisions seek to do just that. Unless we are willing to completely end the work-based visa programs, we have an obligation to ensure they are administered and allocated in accordance with the principles that we espouse as Americans.

My goal in sponsoring this legislation many years ago—nearly a decade ago, in fact—was simply to bring some equity into this system.

I have always been struck by the fact that the government has conditioned a benefit—in this case, a green card and a pathway to citizenship, given that this is a series of immigrant visa programs at issue—based solely on the applicants' country of origin.

There may have been some legitimate reason many decades ago, in fact, for this. I almost can't think of what those legitimate reasons might have been. Regardless, this has led to a system that largely discriminates against green card applicants from one country—and I mean literally one country. This is inconsistent with our founding principles. This is not how we try to do things as Americans. And it is not right.