

**Statement of Representative Howard L. Berman
On the Introduction of the American Dream Act of 2009
March 26, 2009**

Madame Speaker, I rise this afternoon to talk about the American Dream Act, a bill that I have introduced today with my long-time partners in this endeavor, Representatives Lucille Roybal-Allard and Lincoln Diaz-Balart. We are joined in our effort by a bipartisan group of dedicated original cosponsors. I believe that all of us have come to this effort for the same reason—to keep our country from squandering the promise of thousands of young people who have been raised here, worked hard in school, and would like to pursue higher education or serve their country in the military. These students face tremendous obstacles in reaching their potential because, through no fault of their own, they exist in a legal limbo with no way to adjust their immigration status.

In America, we value every young person. We reward hard work and good moral character. We value the drive to continue one's education, and we don't penalize children for the misdeeds of their parents. But current federal law punishes many children for the decision that their parents made to bring them to this country. Now, when these young people finish high school, their choices are few: they can try to find work illegally in order to support themselves or they can hope to somehow continue their education while under a legal cloud. They consider themselves Americans because this country is the only home they've ever really known, but their lives are filled with uncertainty and their future is limited so long as they have no legal status.

This is a travesty. It means that their communities—the communities that they have grown up in and call home—will never fully reap the benefits of their abilities. We have set up obstacles to their success at every turn, and our goal here today is to find a way to ensure that we don't waste their potential.

My own interest in this issue was intensified when a family near my district wrote to me asking for help for a young undocumented student. This young woman was brought to the United States by her mother when she was a small child. She attended public schools in California, where she was an honors student in high school, received awards for her outstanding community service, and graduated with a near perfect grade point average. When it came time for her to go to college, she found that she was ineligible not just for federal financial aid, but for in-state tuition as well. But this young woman was one of the rare undocumented students in this country fortunate enough to get help from a private source. She participated in a community mentoring program through which she met a couple who came to consider her a part of their family after working with her for many years. They couldn't bear to see this young woman give up her dreams simply because the federal government wanted to punish her for the decision her mother made to bring her to this country illegally. This young woman, with the help of her community and friends, was able to go to college in California and graduated with honors. She was then admitted to graduate school, but was unable to attend because the program to which she was admitted could not give her the tuition waiver it customarily

offers to students of her caliber. This young woman was extraordinarily lucky to get the help she did in paying for her undergraduate education, but in the end, she was in the same place she was before she entered school. She was undocumented and had no reasonable means to adjust her status.

Shortly before I encountered this young woman's family, an outstanding young man in my district was brought to my attention because he wanted very much to get an appointment to one of the military academies and serve his country. He was a successful high school student and would have made an excellent appointment. But shortly into the process, it was determined that though he had lived in the United States for most of his life, he was undocumented and wouldn't have been able to accept the nomination. A few weeks after this occurred, I was at a dinner where I happened to be seated next to the Secretary of the Army. I related the situation to the Secretary over dinner, and we discussed what a waste it was to have to turn away a young man with such promise and dedication. A few days later I got a letter from the Secretary expressing interest in finding a way to let young people like my constituent who feel the call to serve their country, do so.

These are the young people who motivated me to introduce this bill, and there are students like them in nearly every congressional district in the country. Every year I see private bills that Members have introduced for constituents in this same situation because there is no other relief available to them in our broken immigration laws. I could have done the same for my constituents too, but I quickly came to realize that there was a much bigger issue to address. I would ask my colleagues who introduce these private bills to broaden their focus. Instead of seeking to help just one young person, we should fix the underlying problem.

It is almost a mantra in this country. Parents tell their children: work hard, get your education, and you will succeed. For undocumented immigrant children, this turns out to be a cruel hoax. These young people are in many ways, first generation Americans. They were raised here by immigrant parents. They don't remember their parents' country of origin or feel any tie to it any more than first-generation American citizens do. When we first introduced this legislation, I frequently received letters from students who told me that they grew up believing they were U.S. citizens. They had no knowledge that they'd been brought here illegally until they applied for federal financial aid for college and they were turned down because their social security number doesn't match their name. Their parents never told them.

We are not the only ones who see the need to act. The plight of these students has been addressed by several state legislatures around the country. More than a dozen states have enacted laws to provide in-state tuition at public colleges and universities for students who have attended high school in their state. In the absence of federal action, they've done what they can to help students in their communities.

We've heard from guidance counselors and teachers who work with undocumented students and they tell us that once these students learn that they are, for all

purposes, barred from attending college, their academic performance begins to slip, and their drive to excel devolves into disinterest. This is the time when dropout rates begin to soar, and it is the time that we should step in and ensure that these students reach their potential to become productive citizens of our country.

It makes no sense to me that we maintain a system that brings in thousands of highly-skilled foreign guestworkers each year to fill a gap in our domestic workforce, and at the same time do nothing to provide an opportunity to kids who have grown up here, gone to school here, and want to prepare themselves for these jobs or serve their country in the military. This is the illogical outcome of our current immigration laws that the Dream Act will fix. I encourage my colleagues to join us in this effort.

Finally, Madame Speaker, I want to add that the issues addressed in the American Dream Act are just a fraction of the problems in our immigration system. The Dream Act came about because our immigration laws are, and have been for some time, broken. It is very important that we pass this piece of legislation this year. But it is my fondest hope that we will put together a comprehensive immigration reform package that includes the Dream Act as it was introduced today, and it is my intention to work for and pass that comprehensive immigration reform package this year.