



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

CITY OF CHICAGO • OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

August 28, 2023

To the Honorable Secretary Mayorkas:

Since the arrival of the first “Operation Texas” bus in August of 2022, the State of Illinois and the City of Chicago have spent and obligated over \$250 million to help welcome and support the more than 13,000 asylum seekers who have traveled to Chicago from the US-Mexico border. As we continue to receive new arrivals who often lack sponsors, shelter, and have no immediate legal pathways to work, we have come to understand that this is not a short-term crisis, but rather a long-term reality.

As a result, our focus as city, state, and federal systems must pivot away from emergency responses that have already reached unsustainable levels towards policies that will enable individuals to live with dignity. We must build a system that can safely and capably receive the growing number of new arrivals who seek shelter in our city and state; there is no path to success without significant new federal financial support and immigration policy changes.

Today, we write to you to respectfully request that the Department of Homeland Security leverage its authority to grant parole through the “Significant Public Benefit” designation to create a process for streamlined work authorization in which states could sponsor non-citizens to work in industries facing labor shortages.

Through an expanded process, individuals could be sponsored by state governments to work in critical industries. This would unquestionably contribute “significant public benefit” to our nation’s labor shortages while providing non-citizens, like the thousands of asylum seekers we serve, a faster and more streamlined pathway to self-sufficiency. Here in Illinois, our 2022 WIOA Unified State Plan identified several critical industries where there are expected to be significant job openings including food processing, clean energy, health care (including in nursing and dentistry), transportation, warehousing, and more.

As the asylum seekers we serve have begun to build lives for themselves and their families in Illinois, we have witnessed the dangerous work conditions and exploitation that often result when individuals lack access to legal work and the protections that come with it. All workers in Illinois deserve to feel safe at work. The precarious legal status of non-citizen workers exposes them to a higher risk of mistreatment, especially when employers wield the power to determine the legal presence of an employee. It is our strong recommendation that in the development of this program, worker safety and worker choice is prioritized, and a worker’s legal presence is not solely tied to their employment by a single employer.

We understand that unlike standard asylum applications, various other parole programs, such as the Afghan National and Cuban, Haitian, Nicaraguan, and Venezuelan programs offer significantly

shorter pathways to work authorization and have allowed many migrants to quickly achieve self-sufficiency while contributing to critical industries that help our city and state supply chains, service industries, and care infrastructure thrive.

Our national immigration system continues to be stretched to receive and dutifully serve unprecedented numbers of individuals. We must acknowledge that in the absence of long-awaited comprehensive reform from Congress, we need to consider other significant actions that allow us to tap into the incredible value immigrants bring to our workforce and communities. DHS has the authority to expand the “Significant Public Benefit” parole designation into a process that would allow states like Illinois to opt into a lawful, orderly, efficient parole process that would address critical workforce needs. On behalf of our new residents and the municipalities and communities that are struggling to welcome them, we urge you to use this authority to everyone’s shared benefit.

Thank you for your consideration of this joint proposal. We offer our support in continuing to innovate to move towards an immigration system that better reflects the welcoming values our administrations share.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of JB Pritzker in black ink.

JB Pritzker
Governor, State of Illinois

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Brandon Johnson in black ink.

Brandon Johnson
Mayor, City of Chicago