

Commentary: Cruel immigration laws are keeping families apart

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Body

In recent weeks, President Obama reiterated his commitment to reforming our country's immigration system through compassionate, comprehensive legislation. Describing the Statue of Liberty as a "light to the world," Obama suggested that America's immigrants--whether they have arrived by the Mayflower, slave ship, Ellis Island or the Rio Grande--are one people. I couldn't agree more. For many American families who remain estranged from siblings and parents overseas, however, that sentiment seems out of reach.

The Reuniting Families Act, which I introduced, fixes this problem by allowing all Americans to be reunited with their families, including gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender permanent partners.

This act by Congress is critical in order to dispel erroneous assumptions that continue to fetter immigration reform, particularly at the height of our nation's debt and deficit debate, when the country's economy is still in recovery.

The irony behind anti- immigration sentiment, driven by fear of job loss for Americans if more immigrant workers enter the United States, is that it is more fiscally prudent to legalize, employ and reunite our immigrants than to keep families apart.

We know that lengthy waits waste precious government resources and can discourage potential applicants from using legal channels to join their families in the United States. Our family-based immigration system has not been updated in 20 years, leaving nearly 6 million people stuck waiting indefinitely, which is both unproductive and inexcusable. Five-year separations are quite common; so are 20-year estrangements from siblings and elderly parents. Waits are so long that families receiving visas often find that their children have to reapply as adults and go to the back of the line.

People who have their families by their side are happier, healthier and more able to succeed than those living apart from loved ones for years on end. By pooling resources, families can do together what they can't do alone--start family businesses, create American jobs and contribute more to the general welfare. The healthier the community, the more expendable income is available and the lower the burden on social services.

We know that immigrants who become U.S. citizens consistently pursue higher-paying jobs and higher education, spend more and provide more tax revenue. The legalization process brings other economic benefits, including the retention of remittances. Many workers now send substantial portions of their salaries to family members abroad, but reform could reunite families separated by our immigration system and keep monies in the U.S.

In my home district of San Jose, one family is making heart-wrenching decisions in order to remain together. Judy Rickard recently took early retirement from her job in the California State University system to live abroad six months each year to be with her wife, Karin, who is British. Under current U.S. law, Judy's marriage is not recognized. Why? Because she and Karin are a lesbian couple. Karin can visit Judy in the U.S. only on a tourist

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visa, which provides her entry to the U.S. for only a portion of each year. Now, Judy is faced with the prospect of having to leave her home in California and go into exile abroad--all to **keep** her **family** together.

This legislation would expand the definition of **families** to include couples like Judy and Karin. In doing so, it ensures our country has the ability to attract new workers to fuel the U.S. economy, and gives employers, like Judy's, a valuable tool to **keep** talented Americans on the job, rather than forcing them to leave their employers in order to **keep** their **families** together.

Stories like Judy's are increasingly the rule, not the exception, when it comes to **family** unification. Federal **laws** are literally tearing **families apart** and separating American citizens from their loved ones. This is wrong, and it is time that American lawmakers do something to protect and preserve the American **family**.

We are a nation of immigrants, and our country deserves an **immigration** system that honors that legacy and supports key **family** values, like **keeping families** intact. The Reuniting **Families** Act represents a giant step forward in that commitment and provides a blueprint that respects **families**, strengthens our economy and fixes a badly broken system. We urge Congress to take action now. For every day Congress delays, more **families** face separation.

Rep. Michael Honda is the chair emeritus of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus. Judy Rickard is the author of the recently published book "Torn **Apart**" and has worked with **Immigration** Equality Action Fund to ensure **immigration** reform legislation is inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender **families** like hers. She lives in the Cambrian area of San Jose.

Graphic

Congressman Mike Honda holds a town hall meeting on health care reform at the Mayer Theatre at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara on Sept. 13, 2009. (Gary Reyes/Mercury News)

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