

Place immigrants with sponsored families while status is determined, by Julio Mendez

Julio Mendez For The Press

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The news that Atlantic City Airport was under consideration for temporary housing of immigrants waiting for asylum hearings brought unanimous opposition from area political leaders. Democrats and Republicans expressed ire at the idea, all attempting to score political advantage.

Taking a position on the merits is expected, but the aggressive rhetoric was out of line. Some of the comments lacked empathy, failing to recognize the human tragedy. None of the leaders proposed any meaningful solution or invited a discussion of the issue.

What has become of America, the land of immigrants? Why is the latest wave of immigrants seeking a better life in this country different from our own ancestors?

Immigration is complicated. It is a wedge political issue used to inflame views and score political points. Both political parties do it, and both parties have failed to meaningfully address the issue.

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What we heard in recent days is the latest example of political grandstanding, which started with the Biden administration making a proposal without explanation or consulting Atlantic County leaders.

Most Americans living today descended from immigrants, the latest wave arriving from places also facing political upheaval, economic crisis, lack of security and no hope. The central reason for coming to America is to provide a better life for their families. Which is precisely the reason our ancestors came.

America and New Jersey, where one in five residents was born in another country, have a welcoming tradition. Yes, borders must be safeguarded, and there needs to be an orderly process for entry into the country. However, the immigration crisis requires meaningful solutions, not political grandstanding.

Many of these immigrants are similar to families already in South Jersey communities making contributions to its economy and society. These same immigrants are working hard every day in Atlantic County businesses. They obey laws, attend church, and their children attend local schools. Many serve in the armed forces.

The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, signed into law by President Reagan, was the last comprehensive immigration law in the country. That was 40 years ago. The law passed with bipartisan support and granted immigrants who already had entered the U.S. illegally a path to legal status. More than 3 million immigrants came out of the shadows, applied, and became legal residents.

In his last speech as president, Reagan invoked the Emma Lazarus poem inscribed on the Statue of Liberty — “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” — in defining who we are as a country.

“Lady Liberty symbolizes our freedom and represents our heritage. ... Other countries may seek to compete with us. But in one vital area, as a beacon of freedom and opportunity that draws the people of the world, no country on Earth comes close.”

In today’s political climate, Reagan’s view of America would be viewed by many as out of step.

Compare and contrast the Reagan approach with the use of immigrant families as political props. Or the harsh rhetoric of some political leaders.

It took courage, determination and desperation to come to America. At the basic human level, they deserve empathy and a fair process.

On the merits, using Atlantic City Airport is likely not a good idea. Even advocates oppose it. A camp setting with 6-foot fencing is not the solution. A better outcome would be to place the immigrants with sponsored families while they wait for a prompt resolution of their case.

The immigration system is outdated, slow and bureaucratic. It fails to anticipate and react to the evolving reasons causing immigration waves through U.S. borders. Putting up a wall will not solve the problem.

What about finding common ground? The process has to begin with the Biden administration and include all points of view in the discussion. That didn't happen last month.

The following principles may be a starting point: protecting the border to avoid the crisis that prompted the Atlantic City Airport proposal; expanding legal immigration; finding a way to legalization for law-abiding undocumented immigrants and their children, especially the Dreamers; deporting undocumented immigrants who have committed serious crimes; and addressing causes of emigration from the home countries.

Atlantic County and New Jersey have a proud history of welcoming immigrants. Political leaders should listen to President Reagan. Compromise to find a resolution, enact comprehensive reform and stop the finger-pointing and harsh rhetoric.

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