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Q & A: Kevin Appleby of the USCCB

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Distinctly Catholic

This week, we are discussing immigration reform. Our first interviewee is Kevin Appleby, the Director of Migration Policy and Public Affairs at the USCCB.

The question: What needs to be done to get immigration reform passed, and what are the prospects for passage?

Kevin Appleby:

Among the many issues confounding lawmakers and eluding bipartisan support on Capitol Hill these days is immigration, perhaps one of the most controversial topics in the country. Our elected officials in Washington have avoided it like an unwelcome neighbor knocking at the front door. Problem is, the knocks keep getting louder and louder.

The latest flashpoint in the debate is the recently passed Arizona law SB 1070, state legislation which, among other provisions, under certain conditions permits law enforcement to inquire as to an individual's legal status. Whatever one thinks about the substance of the law, it certainly has re-ignited the national debate and, most particularly, has highlighted congressional dithering on fixing the nation's broken immigration system.

For several years now, the U.S. Catholic bishops have advocated for comprehensive reform of our nation's immigration laws, citing the devastating impacts current laws have on immigrant families and children. Close to 5 million U.S. citizen children live with either one or two parents without legal status, leaving immigrant families

vulnerable to separation. In fact, the federal government has forcibly separated thousands of these families in recent years through workplace raids and other enforcement actions, deporting parents away from their children.

The bishops, along with other faith groups, have argued that the 11 million persons in the country illegally should have a chance to pay their debt to society through a fine and back taxes, begin learning English, and get in the back of the line for a green card and eventual citizenship. This would ensure that family unity is protected, as undocumented family members would receive legal status and not face deportation.

Opponents of the path to citizenship proposal cite the rule of law, stating that any "reward" of legal status would be condoning illegal behavior. What they fail to acknowledge is that immigrants who enter illegally, drawn by the attraction of jobs, would enter legally if visas were available to them.

Currently, only 5,000 permanent visas are available for unskilled workers, while, before the recession, the economy absorbed close to 500,000 migrant workers per year into such industries as agriculture, service, and construction. It is time to examine all parts of our immigration system and reform it to match the future labor needs of our country

Moreover, more of the same -- increased expenditures on border enforcement---will not solve the challenge of illegal immigration. The U.S. government has spent close to \$100 billion on immigration enforcement since the year 2000, but the number of undocumented has increased and the debate rages on. Tragically, during this time nearly 5,000 migrants, including women and children, have died in the American desert.

Another approach is clearly needed. By creating legal avenues for migrant workers to enter and work, based on economic needs and by the unemployment rate among Americans, law enforcement could focus upon criminal elements along our border, not on those simply attempting to find work or join family members.

As Congress continues to avoid this issue, the situation worsens. Families continue to be divided, migrants continue to be exploited in the workplace and die in the desert, and laws like SB 1070 continue to erode the hard earned trust that now exists between immigrant communities and law enforcement. Without federal action, states and communities may continue to pass their own laws, creating a patchwork across the nation which would not serve the country*s long-term interests.

There should be a legislative window in the next year for Congress to

consider immigration reform, either later this year or early in the next Congress. They will not act, however, unless they are moved to by their constituents.

To help move Congress to action this year, please visit the Justice for Immigrants website of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops at justiceforimmigrants.org, and send a postcard to your Senator and Representatives.

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Tomorrow's interviewee: Jennifer Butler, Executive Director of Faith in Public Life

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