



# Yearning to breathe free



## No immigration reform hurts opportunity for all

By **Eric Friedenwald-Fishman** | Metropolitan Group Creative Director/President

**On September 1st**, the Alabama Immigration Law H.B. 56<sup>1</sup> (barring legal injunctions) will take effect, putting into action measures that demonize and marginalize the “other” in a fashion that makes Arizona’s law seem tame. The summary of the law reads, “prohibits undocumented non-citizens from enrolling in state post-secondary educational institutions, requires schools to submit student immigrant statistics, disallows housing and business contracts, disallows hiring, concealing, harboring, shielding, or transporting undocumented non-citizens as well.” In the last few weeks, protests around the nation of the Secure Communities program’s<sup>2</sup> aggressive deportation approach highlighted the deportation of parents of US-born children and of women seeking domestic violence services. On August 18th, the Administration announced it would ask officers to use greater discretion on which cases they moved forward for deportation—a nod to the vocal concerns of immigrant communities and their advocates, but a far cry from addressing the issue or countering the “immigrant as other” narrative that has become the status quo.

What concerns me about both of these policy and practice changes is what they exemplify in our culture. We have moved to a place where the acceptable narrative and the normative expectation is to readily accept nullifying contracts and denying access to education for immigrants as the law of the land, while positioning the use of discretion in the most egregious deportation cases as progress. I see this shift and the anti-immigrant trend line it advances as deeply damaging to social innovation, social justice, and civil society. Three areas in particular raise concern me: limiting opportunity for contribution, increasing social inequities that exacerbate already intractable problems, and damaging our national ethos, thus diminishing our expectations.

### Limiting opportunity for contribution

With an estimated 12 million undocumented Americans, a meaningful percentage of our nation’s workforce, consumer base, community members, and students live in the shadows. These people can’t fully participate in the life

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of our communities and can't take advantage of opportunities, and this severely limits their ability to contribute. This lack of opportunity not only damages the lives of undocumented individuals and communities, but—and this is my focus here—it damages us all. The solutions to vexing problems do not live only with the select few, the experts, or those in positions of power. Imagination, creative approaches, and innovation come from everyone who has the license to imagine and—as importantly—the freedom to share their ideas and voice. The more punitive our laws, and the more criminalized and isolating the narrative becomes, the more we limit participation in solutions ideation and dissemination of what we discovered. This challenge plays out across education and employment levels, class, and geography, and applies to challenges such as attracting talent, filling gaps in stakeholder feedback, and finding seats at the solutions table for communities experiencing the disparity.

### **Increasing social inequities that exacerbate already intractable problems**

As we codify into law and meld into culture policies and practices that limit access to education, employment, housing, medical care, safety, training, financial, and contractual protections, we expand virtually every problem social entrepreneurs seek to solve.

- Crippling poverty is sucking the vitality out of our cities and rural communities—let's limit employment options, financial protections, and basic financial services!
- An obesity and chronic disease epidemic is stealing future workforce strength and increasing per capita spending for health—let's reduce access to all but emergency care!

- We are concerned about an increasing achievement and innovation gap—let's cut off access to education and training!

The list could go on and on.

As exaggerated as this sounds, this set of counterintuitive and counter-productive choices are exactly what “immigrants as criminals” and “let's make it really tough on them here” frames perpetuate.

### **Damaging our national ethos diminishes our expectations**

Worst of all, yet hardest to see, is the toll that accepting this dehumanizing narrative takes on our sense of identity and national character. We operate as social innovators in a country deeply connected to the core ideas of “rule of law,” “innocent until proven guilty,” “freedom and opportunity,” “by-the-boot-straps success” and the “virtue of competition in free markets.” With a lack of nuance and a blind eye to unforeseen consequences, each of these concepts can become a cliché, can be taken to damaging extremes, and can perpetuate injustices, but they are also powerful concepts that support a nation committed to innovation, and to increased liberty and justice. What happens to our moral certitude as a nation based upon the rule of law when we codify that legal contracts with undocumented people are null? How comfortable are we with innocent until proven guilty when we ask law enforcement to question our immigration status at traffic stops? How firmly can we stand on our foundation of freedom and opportunity when young adults who have lived nearly their entire life in this country or have served in its military cannot pursue a college education? How confident are we with the truth that with hard work and the open competition of the free

market, anyone can succeed, when our discourse of fear shouts, “Keep them out, they are taking our jobs!”? Beyond individual injustices, and the opportunity and direct costs to society of this cognitive disconnect, there is a significant cost to our culture that over time limits our perspective and steals our optimism.

**So, what should we do to counter this costly incivility?**

**Speak out.** Social entrepreneurs (particularly those not directly engaged in immigration reform) need to voice concern and highlight the costs to our society. How does keeping millions in the shadows impact your field, your work, your organization, and your community? We have the privilege of voice and of professional and community networks—we must use them. Allowing a narrative of fear, vitriol, and dehumanization to go unchallenged helps it to gain legitimacy. Let’s not allow it.

**Recommit to Lazarus.** Emma Lazarus’ poem on the Statue of Liberty proclaims, “Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” For millions, this declaration offered hope and stood for “world-wide welcome.” This poem speaks to an ethos that is still true for most Americans—the belief that we are a society free of “ancient pomp” and ready to offer equity, opportunity, and freedom to our fellow human beings so they can “breathe free.” Let’s remind ourselves of this anthem and act upon it in our local communities to arrest the advance of Arizona-like policies and the spread of a frame counter to the closely held values of freedom and opportunity.

**Demand comprehensive reform.** Our immigration system is broken and cries out for comprehensive reform. Removing 12 million from the shadows, creating clear paths to

citizenship, and fully engaging the potential of immigrants to contribute to and benefit our society is both a moral and practical imperative. We can and must hold all of our elected leaders and—during this campaign year—every candidate of every party accountable to address this concern. We must let our leaders know comprehensive immigration reform is a priority for diverse innovators and leaders, and not a cynical bargaining chip for a percentage of the Latino vote.

Together, we can all breathe free.

Links:

<sup>1</sup> Alabama Immigration Law:

[http://www.acca-online.org/legis\\_news/2011\\_bills/HB56-enr.pdf](http://www.acca-online.org/legis_news/2011_bills/HB56-enr.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Secure Communities:

<http://www.aila.org/content/default.aspx?docid=25045>



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