

# Florida leaders demand immigration reform to strengthen economy, protect families

BY JIMENA TAVEL

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Immigration Attorneys from Americans for Immigrant Justice discuss the difficulties of representing small children in court.

By **José A. Iglesias**

A coalition of more than 70 business leaders, politicians and academics signed a document demanding that Florida congressional representatives pass bipartisan immigration reform that will drive economic growth.

The [Florida Compact on Immigration](#), released Thursday at a news conference on Miami Dade College's West Campus, details six principles the signers hope lawmakers will use as guidelines. Signers include MDC President Eduardo Padrón, billionaire Mike B. Fernandez and Buddy Dyer, the mayor of Orlando.

This is the second compact on immigration created. [The first](#) arose in 2011.

The signers are asking elected officials in Washington, D.C., to view immigration reform as a federal responsibility.

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State Sen. Anitere Flores, R-Miami, said that as long as federal representatives don't address the issue, state officials will keep being forced to take matters into their own hands. [A controversial bill by state Sen. Joe Gruters, a Tampa Republican, to ban sanctuary cities](#) is an example of that, she said.

“Once Congress does its work, there will not be a need for any type of this legislation in the state level,” Flores said. “It’s high time for Washington to act.”



Eduardo Padrón, President of Miami Dade College speaks with the Miami Herald editorial board Thursday, Jan. 4, 2018.

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Supporters of the compact want laws that will strengthen the economy and workforce, ensure law enforcement focuses on public safety and accurately determines who is permitted to work, and fosters competitive communities to attract and retain talent.

Julio Fuentes, president and CEO of the Florida State Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, said immigrants regularly start businesses, invest in their communities and fill job gaps in all industries, from high technology to service.

Immigrants in Florida paid \$7.8 billion in state and local taxes and held \$91.9 billion in spending power in 2017 alone, [according to data](#) from the [New American Economy](#), which together with the [American Business Immigration Coalition](#) and the [Immigration Partnership and Coalition Fund](#) created the compact.

Fuentes said his biggest pet peeve is how the U.S. trains immigrant students in its universities and then simply sends them back to their homelands, losing that investment. Mark Trowbridge, the president of Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce, agreed.

“They fall in love with this country just like we all do and then we close the door behind them. It’s unfortunate,” Trowbridge said.

Immigration reform should, according to the compact, prioritize keeping families together to ensure supportive home environments for children. The Trump administration started separating families at the U.S.-Mexico border in 2018 in an effort to deter illegal immigration.

The compact also asks politicians to allow immigrants who don’t have a legal status and “are of good character” to become “fully participating members” of society, particularly Florida Dreamers and TPS holders.

Dreamers are those protected under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a program by President Barack Obama that allowed children brought to the country by their illegal-immigrant parents a chance to stay lawfully. President Donald Trump terminated it in 2017, leaving its recipients in limbo.

TPS is a federal program that for decades allowed hundreds of thousands of immigrants from countries experiencing natural disasters or other extraordinary conditions to temporarily live and work in the United States. President Trump stopped extending several of these programs when he got to the White House.

The compact signers hope to encourage other community leaders to sign it and become advocates for it, too. Trowbridge said he's feeling optimistic that federal officials will pay attention.

"You can't go into this thinking it's not going to happen," he said.

For his part, Doral Mayor Juan Carlos Bermudez said everyone, regardless of the compact, has a responsibility to urge congressional representatives to pass immigration reform.

"The time has come for immigration reform," Bermudez said. "Not because of a debate of whether we want something built or not built, not because we want a constituency in New York or Montana to follow us, but because it's the right thing to do."



From the left, Julio Fuentes, president of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Florida, Helena Poleo, president of Influence Communications, Mark Trowbridge, president of the Chamber of Commerce of Coral Gables, Juan Carlos Bermúdez, mayor of Doral, Wendi Adelson, director of Immigration Partnership & Coalition Fund and Rudy Fernández, representative of New American Economy. **MARIA ALEJANDRA CARDONA** *FOR EL NUEVO HERALD*