

TESTIMONY

TO: House Federal and State Affairs Committee
Representative Steve Brunk, Chairman

FR: Mary Lou Jaramillo, President and CEO, El Centro, Inc.

DATE: February 13, 2012

RE: HB 2712 and HB 2603 – Supporting the Kansas Business Workers and Community Partnership Act

Chairman Brunk and Honorable Members of the House Federal and State Affairs Committee,

I am Mary Lou Jaramillo, President and CEO of El Centro, Inc., a multi-service organization in Wyandotte and Johnson counties with a mission of “strengthening communities and empowering families through educational, social, and economic opportunities.” In addition to providing direct services, we have been involved over the past ten years in local, state, and federal policy issues that affect our communities. We recognize the complexity and the controversy of immigration debates, and we lament that, too often, the search for humane, pragmatic solutions falls victim to the harsh divides of politics and polarization. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today in support of legislation that, in our view, represents an effort to bridge that divide, to recognize the contributions of immigrants to our state, and to prod the federal government into assuming its responsibility to craft truly workable immigration laws.

Because HB2712/HB2603 is an unprecedented effort to work within the confines of federal law to find a solution that works for immigrant workers, employers, and communities, there are clearly some uncertainties that accompany its implementation, and El Centro, Inc. would want all possible assurances that the immigrant workers whose participation is vital to the success of the partnership would be protected from Department of Homeland Security reprisal as they proceed through the process. Despite those outstanding issues, there is much to embrace about the proposal as it stands, and we welcome the direction the bill takes—away from the sure path of economic ruin and community devastation wrought by anti-immigrant legislation in Arizona and Alabama—and towards reasonable compromises that see immigrants as part of the solution to Kansas’ economic needs, rather than, incorrectly, as the source of the problem.

Specifically, El Centro, Inc. and our Board of Directors are encouraged by provisions within HB2712 that:

- Emphasize integration, through requiring immigrant participants to work towards English proficiency *and* providing funds and organizational support to equip them with the necessary resources—we know that immigration can continue to work for Kansas as it has for generations, and organizations like ours are committed to continuing our work to bridge communities and facilitate full integration
- Provide for family unification, by allowing immigrant workers’ spouses and children to remain in Kansas with them—we believe strongly in the sanctity of the family and resist any efforts to split immigrant parents from their children, who are often U.S. citizens
- Focus on industries in need of labor and require employers to abide by applicable labor laws, avoiding the trap of pitting U.S.-born workers against immigrant ones

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- Recognize the value of immigrant workers, especially in key Kansas industries—placing the responsibility for program fees on employers demonstrates the asset that these individuals can be to the Kansas economy, while also making the entry process feasible for participants

Kansas, and, indeed, every state in the country, needs congressional action on immigration reform to address the brokenness of a system that separates families, creates long waits for a chance at U.S. citizenship, and makes it nearly impossible for some employers to hire the workers they want and need. Until that time, El Centro, Inc. appreciates the approach represented in HB2712, to find a workable compromise that attempts to cut past the rhetoric to build a more prosperous Kansas, through the medium of a humane inclusion of the immigrants who already call Kansas home.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue, and for your time today. I would be happy to stand for questions.

Mary Lou Jaramillo

President/CEO

El Centro, Inc.