

13 July 2021

Oireachtas Éireann
Leinster House
Kildare Street
Dublin
D02 XR20

RE: Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs & Defense

Thank you Chairman Flanagan and committee members for inviting us here today to meet with you, and provide an overview of the work of the Coalition of Irish Immigration Centers, as well as discuss the current state of immigration in the United States.

The Coalition

The Coalition was established in 1996 to promote the welfare of Irish immigrants and serve as the umbrella organization for Irish immigration centers throughout the United States. The Coalition currently has eleven member centers from coast to coast that provide a unique array of services, outreach & assistance to Irish immigrants, prioritizing confidentiality and cultural competency.

The Coalition strives to be a strong, cohesive and representative voice for the needs of its membership, and the Irish Diaspora at large. Through ongoing and generous support from the Government of Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Emigrant Support Programme, the Coalition collaborates with its membership to examine the needs of the Irish Diaspora. Further the Coalition supports its membership to enhance the direct service work they provide to the Irish community by prioritizing best practice, information sharing, data collection, national reporting, and the distribution of current accurate and reliable information in the areas of immigration services, J1 visa programming and professional learning.

Over the past four years, the Coalition has led a highly successful and collaborative Immigration Analysis initiative in partnership with the Embassy of Ireland, Washington, DC, with support from a Strategic Diaspora Fund of the Irish Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The program has facilitated the provision of crucial and pertinent information on immigration policy changes and their impact on the Irish Diaspora throughout the Trump Administration, and continues to do so now under the Biden Administration. As the Embassy designated point of contact for current, accurate and reliable information for the Irish community, the Coalition has produced and distributed:

- 38 community information advisories to the wider Irish community;
- 16 background documents providing in-depth analysis of immigration policy changes for use by the Embassy and Consulates, as well as Ministers and other Irish government officials;
- 15 internal immigration briefings streamlining information and accompanying resources for use by Coalition membership, as well as Consular and Embassy offices.

With the onset of COVID-19, the Immigration Analysis Program accordingly expanded its purview to include community information pieces on international travel protocols, federally mandated mask wearing, vaccination information and member center services.

New Administration & Current Context

The inauguration of the Biden Administration brought with it a collective sense of relief after four years of high anxiety and concern for immigrant communities, the Irish included and in particular the undocumented community, due to the Trump Administration's hostile rhetoric on deportation, strict enforcement and anti-immigrant policy changes.

However, Trump era policies do continue to affect the country under the Biden Administration, and the ongoing impact and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to have a major impact on the U.S. immigration system. In particular the Presidential Proclamation suspending travel from certain regions, including Ireland, as well as the shutdown of the U.S. Embassies and Consular offices globally are currently producing the largest ramifications.

The travel suspension has produced consequences on both sides of the Atlantic. First, temporary visa holders currently in the U.S. have essentially been stranded here without the ability to return to Ireland, renew their visa at the Embassy and successfully re-enter the United States. Further issuance of new visas for people in Ireland has almost stopped completely as the U.S. Embassy is not scheduling visa appointments for those seeking temporary visas under the premise that these individuals cannot travel from Ireland to the United States, with some limited exceptions.

Immigration restrictions due to COVID-19 have created massive backlogs for consular appointments, as well as United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) domestic adjudications. It is estimated that it could take years to address the backlogs, particularly at overseas diplomatic posts, and although proposals have been made to address the backlogs, much will depend on policies initiated by the Biden Administration and additional funding to increase capacity at these agencies.

Pending Legislation

President Biden introduced his US Citizenship Act 2021 in January, which was subsequently introduced in both houses of Congress. The proposed act is a comprehensive bill that highlights legalization for the large undocumented population in the U.S., and looks to expand and reform the pathway for legal immigration moving forward.

To date, there has been no movement on the bill in either the House or the Senate, and the likelihood of any bill passing the Senate with the filibuster in place is improbable. Within this context the current approach is piecemeal immigration reform bills through the budget reconciliation process, which only requires a simple majority to pass. However, there is a lack of agreement on what should be included in these smaller bills, as well as what populations would receive benefits.

J1 Exchange Program

The US Department of State ended the suspension of the 12 month J1 visa program in March 2021, and Irish students and graduates are now able to apply for their visas. However, travel restrictions and visa processing delays at the US Embassy in Dublin presents uncertainty as to when J1 students will be able to commence their exchange visitor programs and start their internships in the United States. The delay in processing has resulted in some prospective applicants becoming ineligible due to program timelines, an issue that has been raised with Coalition membership. U.S. based employers are keen to resume hiring Irish graduates for the 12 month program.

The summer J1 program has not occurred for the past 2 years due to COVID-19. Local businesses in areas such as San Diego, Cape Cod, and Chicago are reporting negative financial impact on seasonal businesses directly related to the lack of J1 students available to work for the summer months.

The Summer J1 visa program has been an important “rite of passage” for tens of thousands of young Irish men and women, and it contributes substantially to the transatlantic business and cultural relationship between Ireland and the United States - a large portion of the Coalition’s Board of Directors, now leaders in the Irish Diaspora, participated in the J1 program. The Summer J1 program is a win for Irish students who gain intercultural and international experience, U.S. businesses who are able to increase the seasonal workforce and Irish businesses alike as these graduates return to Ireland with skills, leadership and a more diverse, global mindset.

The Undocumented Community

The Irish undocumented community in the United States was affected particularly harshly by both the Trump Administration and then COVID-19. As above, the ongoing and pervasive anti-immigrant rhetoric of the previous administration created particular fear and anxiety among the Irish undocumented community, resulting in a pulling away from centers and their essential programs and services. The undocumented retreated further under the radar, isolated from the community.

In addition to systemic concerns, many undocumented Irish work in construction, hospitality and other service-oriented professions. The pandemic and associated year-long shutdown resulted in loss of employment, diminished savings and crisis situations for these individuals, who were also excluded from U.S. government benefits, such as unemployment and federal pandemic relief monies.

Coalition membership reported an increase in inquiries from undocumented individuals and families looking to return to Ireland during the pandemic as a last resort, with the pandemic becoming the last straw for many.

COVID-19 & Irish Centers

The Coalition member centers transitioned extremely quickly to remote work and virtual programming to facilitate the continuation of all essential programs including to immigration, social services and senior support. In addition to regular programs, the centers also provided emergency services and hardship fund distribution to assist those most impacted by the pandemic. Centers opened food pantries, increased contact hours and partnered with respective local and state agencies and organizations to advocate for increased financial support for the most vulnerable of the community, especially the undocumented.

Centers across the country also continue to work with local government and community partners to implement essential support programs in their regions. Many states, including New York, Illinois, California and Massachusetts, have initiated programs specifically for undocumented populations, and the Irish centers have worked hard to ensure that our community members have access to these supports where applicable.

Wellness & Mental Health

Social services have historically been a hallmark of member center programming. Though immigration may be the presenting problem for an individual, it is often coupled with a plethora of other challenges related to mental health, substance abuse, legal issues and family concerns. Therefore, all of our centers provide wellness support, ranging from resource and referral to center-based therapeutic intervention and clinical support.

The pandemic exacerbated wellness issues in the whole of the Irish community as individuals and families lost employment, were not eligible for government support, were unable to travel and incurred increased concerns for family abroad and separation from them.

The centers addressed the increased need for wellness services successfully by ramping up outreach efforts, providing therapeutic services virtually and ensuring community connection through cultural virtual events.

Closing

Once again, the Coalition thanks the committee for the opportunity to meet with you today. We are happy to answer any questions you may have, as well as continue to have these conversations in the future.

Respectfully submitted,

Aileen Leonard Dibra, Executive Director
Coalition of Irish Immigration Centers
aileen.dibra@ciic-usa.org • +1 914.837.2007