

Statement of  
JB Pritzker  
Governor, State of Illinois  
before the  
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
U.S. House of Representatives  
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Chairman Comer, Ranking Member Lynch, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the critically important topic of immigration. Governors, including those joining me today, have had to shoulder the consequences of a broken immigration system for years. I am proud of how the Great State of Illinois has responded to this challenge—creating solutions that promote public safety, treat people with dignity, support our economy, and respect the rule of law. Congress, however, must act. I hope our conversation today will be a productive step towards much needed bipartisan reforms.

The crisis at the southern border in recent years has been devastating; the response from some of our political leaders even more so. As individuals fleeing poverty, violence, and persecution arrived at our border, our nation's leaders were confronted with a choice: would we do everything possible to make the promise of America the practice of America? Some border state governors and mayors abandoned our nation's highest ideals—instead choosing to spend millions of taxpayer dollars to treat people as pawns, busing them to states like ours in a dehumanizing attempt to leverage the crisis for political gain. The State of Illinois chose a different path. With people's lives at stake—children, pregnant women, and the elderly who were sent to our state in the dead of night, dropped outside far from our designated intake and welcome centers, in freezing temperatures—and a federal government that was unwilling to address the national crisis in any meaningful way, we knew we could not simply ignore the suffering right in front of us.

Those who were bused to Illinois were generally presented to federal law enforcement before their arrival to our state. Federal immigration laws allowed them to be released into the community as they awaited processing, but did not allow them to legally work or coordinate a place for them to stay—leaving individuals with few options in the interim. So, Illinois filled in the gaps where federal immigration policy failed, ensuring that people were not starving on our streets as they were processed through our broken immigration system, sought asylum, applied for other forms of immigration relief, or went through removal proceedings. We understand the responsibility we bear to treat people with dignity, respect, and fairness.

Within two weeks of the first buses arriving in Illinois in August 2022, we issued a disaster proclamation to immediately unlock resources to help the City of Chicago, Cook County, and other jurisdictions handle the immigrants being sent to our state. As more individuals were involuntarily sent to Illinois—ultimately totaling over 50,000 people—we used a data-driven

plan to move migrants out of the state's temporary system of care and on to independence while they awaited immigration guidance from the federal government. We supported local efforts related to shelter, housing, and support services. We assisted immigrants in moving through the federal Temporary Protected Status and work authorization processes as quickly as possible so they could gain employment and contribute to our economy—a key step to preventing this rapid influx of immigrants from destabilizing our communities, a stated goal of political opponents.

As Governor, my responsibility is to ensure that all Illinoisans feel safe in their homes, their businesses, and their communities. That is why my administration continued to make significant investments in public safety, even as our resources were strained because of the lack of federal support during the crisis—expanding our state police force and investing in efforts to reduce gun violence. Our investments led to significant reductions in crime. For example, our Peacekeeper Program, an effort we adopted in 2023 to engage and train residents to mediate and de-escalate conflicts, led to a 41% reduction in gun violence rates in hotspots targeted by the program in 2023 and 2024 compared to the previous two years. This is not just a statistic; this number reflects lives saved and families spared from devastation.

There is more we must do to uphold our commitment to public safety for all, and we will continue to work with federal and local partners in this effort. Violent criminals have no place on our streets; if they are undocumented, we want them out of Illinois and out of our country. When the federal government has a judge-signed warrant for a criminal's arrest, we work to assist them, regardless of that criminal's immigration status. But what we will not do is participate in any violations of the law or abuses of power. We will uphold the law, and we will continue to prioritize precious local and state law enforcement resources for fighting crime.

Maintaining our shared values does not mean we must sacrifice public safety. At a time when other politicians attempted to distort the truth and disrupt our state, we stayed true to the virtues of the Land of Lincoln. For as long as I am Governor, Illinois will uphold our Midwestern and American values—making sure our state treats people with dignity, respect, and fairness.

## **Responding to the Influx of Immigrants**

Illinois did not ask for this crisis, which was neither necessary nor inevitable, but we responded to it—with empathy and urgency. The absence of leadership at the federal level by both Democrats and Republicans, and the deliberate actions of leaders in border states, created an untenable situation for Illinois and other states. Border state politicians refused to coordinate with our state or city officials, instead secretly plotting to send individuals to unknown locations during obscure times that maximized confusion and pain for immigrant families, children, and seniors. The border states trying to score political points did not help us, and Congress was failing to take action, so I wrote to President Biden in October 2023 as the federal government's lack of intervention and coordination at the border exacerbated the crisis. This failure created an unprecedented strain on Illinois's resources.

We did not shrink from this challenge, and together with frontline partners—local government leaders, nonprofits and community organizations, and others—my administration worked to develop a cost-effective and comprehensive plan to address the needs of our communities,

improve the logistics of arrivals to our state, and create workforce programs, all while still prioritizing public safety. This plan focused on three pillars: (1) processing new arrivals in a streamlined and cost-effective intake system; (2) supporting temporary shelter and permanent housing; and (3) prioritizing programs and tools to enable new arrivals to live independently and contribute to the economy as they proceeded through the federal immigration process.

**Intake.** We established an intake center to centrally coordinate services for new arrivals. The intake center eliminated bottlenecks in providing services to immigrants by facilitating a more integrated approach across state, county, city, and community-based organizations. It also reduced delays in helping immigrants find temporary shelter and then permanent housing as well as other critical social services. We also supported the City of Chicago's operation of its Landing Zone—the designated drop-off location for buses bringing individuals to the city—helping to increase personnel and better facilitate the delivery of initial intake services to arriving immigrants.

**Shelter.** We expanded temporary shelter capacity to address urgent needs, including getting people off the streets during freezing temperatures and out of makeshift shelters at police stations and airports. To support temporary shelter capacity, the state and City of Chicago operated over 25 immigrant-focused shelters. At the same time, we invested in efforts to get as many people as possible into more permanent housing where possible and to increase access to the community-based resources people needed to care for themselves and their families.

**Independence.** We prioritized services to help new arrivals live independently and contribute to the economy as they awaited asylum hearings, including through the provision of legal services and workforce development support. A cornerstone of this effort was moving thousands of individuals through the federal Temporary Protected Status and Employment Authorization Document processes as quickly as possible. Illinois stood up large-scale workshops with legal aid providers, pro-bono attorneys, and other partners to facilitate the application process and provide job search resources simultaneously. We also coordinated with the business community that was eager to hire many new arrivals eligible to be employed. By doing so, we reduced the strain on our limited resources and encouraged self-sufficiency.

While much of our efforts were focused in and around Chicago due to the unexpected and increasingly high rates of new arrivals in the city, we also supported other localities that stepped up to address this crisis. In addition to opening our intake center in Chicago, we increased our existing network of Illinois Welcoming Centers to increase the availability of intake services outside of the city. We also launched a program to provide grants to local governments to fund migrant-related emergency needs, including food and shelter capacity, as well as services aligned with our goal of putting immigrants on a path to independence as they moved through the federal immigration process.

We were able to manage this crisis because of sound leadership. State government kept our fiscal house in order and maintained our commitments to the people of Illinois during the unprecedented circumstances. Since then, we have been able to wind down much of our crisis response efforts. For example, the state and the City of Chicago have now been able to close all

immigrant-focused shelters and the city has transitioned to a single, more efficient shelter system, the One System Initiative, to assist all unhoused individuals, including immigrants.

### **Prioritizing Public Safety**

Since I was sworn into office in 2019, violence intervention and reduction has been a core priority of my administration. That is why we have remained laser-focused on making our communities safer, even during a period of otherwise strained resources and overwhelming demands for services caused by the border crisis. Despite these challenges, my administration has prioritized supporting law enforcement, advancing legislation to address critical needs in our state, and partnering with local and federal law enforcement on shared priorities.

Investing in our Illinois State Police (ISP) troopers is one of the most important things we can do for public safety. Since I took office in 2019, my administration has brought on nearly 600 new troopers—during a period that saw many fewer recruits to law enforcement across the nation. Moreover, we have provided our troopers with the resources needed to reduce shootings and fatalities and get illegal guns and drugs off the streets, and we have invested in them personally with higher pay and through higher education partnerships with four public Illinois universities. Through increased resourcing and investments in police, we are continuing to build an even stronger law enforcement agency.

In addition to focusing on law enforcement resources and personnel, I am proud of our comprehensive investments to make our communities safer. I established the Office of Firearm Violence Prevention (OFVP) and worked with the General Assembly to pass the Reimagine Public Safety Act to reduce gun violence in Chicago and throughout Illinois. We strengthened protections for domestic violence survivors. We banned ghost guns and implemented background checks on all gun sales. And, during the crisis, I signed the Protect Illinois Communities Act into law, banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines.

Illinois also prioritizes partnerships with federal law enforcement to tackle crime in our state. We are a member of a number of joint task forces, including the FBI's Chicago Violent Crimes Task Force, where we work with partners on combating gang violence, narcotics trafficking, and gun-related offenses. Members of the ISP work closely with several federal agencies, including the U.S. Marshals Service, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and Homeland Security Investigations. The ISP sits on the Executive Board of the Chicago High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) Board, which includes representatives from the FBI, DEA, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), U.S. Attorney's Office, and other agencies.

Crime in Illinois is trending in the right direction. Violent crime in Chicago is down; the city ended 2024 with its lowest homicide rate in five years. The Peacekeepers Program has seen particular success. The Center for Neighborhood Engaged Research and Science (CORNERS) at Northwestern University found that there was a 31% decline in gun violence in 2023 and 2024 compared to the previous two years in the city and suburban communities served by the Peacekeepers Program. The program's effect on hotspots was even greater, with those locations experiencing a 41% decline in gun violence during the same period.

There is still much more work to do to make sure that every Illinoisan feels safe, which is why we will continue to fund investments to hire and train ISP troopers and to support community-based public safety programs with proven success.

### **Following the Rule of Law in Immigration Enforcement**

I have consistently said and will reaffirm today: violent criminals have no place on our streets, and if they are undocumented, I want them out of Illinois and out of our country. Illinois law allows government employees to cooperate with federal immigration enforcement authorities in the execution of a criminal warrant issued by a federal judge or magistrate.

Illinois follows federal and state laws and will continue to do so. We expect the federal government to do the same. Federal officials should operate in Illinois, as they do in every state, to enforce federal immigration policy, but we will not divert our limited resources and officers to do the job of the federal government when it is not in the best interest of our state, our local communities, or the safety of our residents. The Illinois TRUST Act, bipartisan legislation that was signed into law by my Republican predecessor, reflects this position and is fully compliant with federal law. We want our law enforcement officers focusing on their actual jobs while empowering all members of the public—regardless of immigration status—to feel comfortable calling law enforcement to seek help, report crimes, and cooperate in investigations. It is important that all members of the community trust law enforcement. Prosecuting criminals and preventing crime in our communities becomes exponentially harder when victims or witnesses do not come forward because they are undocumented and afraid of law enforcement.

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I have always believed that Illinois is the best place in the country to live, work, and raise a family. We have grown our economy and created jobs, addressed affordability for working families, and protected individual freedoms. Our success depends on our people and our values, and on our shared history as a nation of immigrants.

Our state—and our country—have long been strengthened by individuals from across the globe seeking freedom, opportunity, and refuge here. I know this from my own history. My family found a home in America after fleeing the Russian massacre of Jews in Ukraine. This country accepted them as refugees, even though they had almost nothing except the shirts on their backs. Their journey took them first to Iowa and then to Chicago, where my great-grandfather slept in a train station on his first night in the city. Like so many immigrants, my family found work and contributed to their community. They would not have succeeded without the support of their neighbors and the government.

It is urgent that Congress act to fix our immigration laws so law-abiding immigrant families can pursue the same opportunities that my great-grandfather had when he arrived here. The vast majority of immigrants contribute to our communities, pay taxes, and abide by the law. We should value their entrepreneurship, ingenuity, and hard work. Both political parties are to blame for America's broken immigration system. I hope that this Committee chooses to be part of the

solution by pursuing bipartisan comprehensive federal immigration reform. If you do, I am here to work with you on the path forward. Our border should be secured. The asylum process should be reformed. Law-abiding, hardworking, tax-paying people who have been in this country for years should have a path to citizenship. We can have a secure border while also having real immigration pathways that allow people to come here, work, and support themselves on a reasonable timeline. Our prosperity and our national security demand it.

Thank you for the opportunity to address how we can learn from the recent crisis and explore ways to address our broken immigration system. I look forward to your comments and questions.