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Governor DeSantis' Signs Culture War Bill Targeting Immigrant Children and Families

Immigrant and refugee advocates, lawyers and former Cuban Pedro Pan child refugee react

(FLORIDA) – With a sign that read “Biden’s Border Crisis”, Governor DeSantis convened press today to witness him signing into law SB1808, another of his culture war bills. He announced a special grand jury to further double down on the fact that he is building a Florida is a hostile state to people who are seeking safety and refuge and that call Florida home.

During the vigorous fight against this bill in the State House and Senate earlier this year, lawyers sounded the alarm on the vagueness of the language included in this piece of legislation. Republicans in the state legislature ignored the calls to, at a minimum, revise the language to protect children, DACA and TPS recipients, and refugees from Afghanistan, Venezuela, Haiti, and others, including evacuees from Ukraine.

Governor DeSantis can still make this right by vetoing this bill. He has until July 2nd to course-correct.

The following is a statement from immigration lawyer Mark Prada, with Prada Urizar, PLLC, the First Vice President for South Florida Chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA):

“The bill continues to be unclear in its application as to which noncitizens a transportation company cannot service. First, its vagueness is such that it is impossible for transportation

companies to have any fair notice of which passengers cannot be accepted, given a recent amendment of the bill which incorporates the entire Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). Second, the bill's reference to "unauthorized aliens" in the INA will apply to persons who are actually legally here. That term is about what classes of persons are not allowed to be employed by businesses, regardless of legal status. So, for example, tourists are not allowed to work because it would contradict the conditions of their tourist visa, so they are "unauthorized aliens" under the INA section referenced by the bill. But they are surely allowed to be in the United States. Prohibiting their transportation goes against the economic point of encouraging tourism to our state."

Isabel Vinent, Co-Executive Director of the Florida Immigrant Coalition states,

"This heinous law could potentially impact Cuban, Afghan, and Venezuelan asylum seekers, Ukrainian evacuees, pending DREAMers and TPS recipients, among others. It will mandate local law enforcement into controversial and ineffective federal 287g ICE contracts, costing local law enforcement precious tax dollars and undermining public safety. From business leaders, faith leaders, and community leaders to former Cuban Pedro Pan refugees and retired law enforcement, a diverse group of Floridians are vehemently against this law. Floridians believe in a state that embraces all children, and demand lawmakers address real crises, such as skyrocketing rents. Instead, Governor DeSantis' future political ambitions consistently drown out the real needs of Floridians. His war against families has [already shut down a shelter](#) that gave care to unaccompanied children. Clearly children, alongside the churches and shelters seeking to protect them, aren't as valuable to DeSantis as pandering to Iowa's primary voters and the wealthy corporations and lobbyists who will help him get there."

Yareliz Mendez-Zamora, Florida Legislative Session Campaign Lead, says,

"This bill, which has been signed into law by the Governor, is detrimental to all Floridian families. There are countless mixed-status families in the state of Florida who will now live in fear. This law will hurt our diverse communities such as refugees. Oftentimes, parole is granted to refugees while they are screened for asylum. Parole is a form of legal permission to be in the United States but without a fixed status. Such persons are considered "inadmissible" until given a fixed status because parole treats them as perpetually seeking "admission" until they are finally given a status. The bill's incorporation of the entire INA will sweep in refugees in this situation. Thus, a particularly vulnerable population would be harmed simply for pursuing the process legally offered to them which often takes months or even years to complete. This is not fair. People deserve the chance to claim their asylum case, as is legally permissible under international law."

Alicia Pelaez, a 74 year-old Cuban former Pedro Pan child refugee lamented,

“For a child, it is deeply traumatic to be separated from family. I was very scared when I came to Miami in the 60’s from Cuba by myself. We were lucky to be welcomed into the state, cared for and protected. I cannot imagine how it will be for the children who are now seeking the same refuge that was granted to me once. They are being treated without respect or human decency. I feel horribly for the children who will be victims of this law. My mind goes to the parents of these children as well, who like my parents don’t want to be separated from their children and only do so to protect them from life and death situations. Whole families will suffer.”

Adriana Rivera, Communications Director for the Florida Immigrant Coalition states, “The sign on his podium is a dead giveaway that this was meant to be a media spectacle of his culture war against the Biden administration and a visual confirmation of his national aspirations. Instead of answering the calls for a state-wide emergency on housing, he spends his time and our money on this circus.”

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We Are Florida is a statewide coalition of community advocates, religious leaders, service providers, unions and nonprofits dedicated to defending the rights of immigrant families across Florida.