



Committee on Migration

c/o Migration and Refugee Services, USCCB

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July 12, 2023

Dear Senator/Representative:

I write on behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Committee on Migration to express our support for the Protect Vulnerable Immigrant Youth Act (S. 1885/H.R. 4285). This simple bill would significantly improve access to permanent legal status for eligible youth who now find themselves subject to a years-long visa backlog, unable to receive the protections they are due, by exempting them from the annual caps for the employment-based, fourth preference (EB-4) visa category. It would simultaneously free up those limited visas for foreign-born religious workers and others who rely upon them to serve American communities. Therefore, with this small change, you could uphold the right to religious exercise, a foundational American principle, and empower vulnerable young people to flourish in their new country, contribute to our nation, and reach their full God-given potential.

Congress created the Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) classification to provide humanitarian protection to abused, neglected, or abandoned youth with the passage of the bipartisan Immigration Act of 1990. State juvenile courts are responsible for determining that reunification with one of the child's parents is not a viable option due to abuse, neglect, abandonment, or a similar basis under state law and it is not in the best interest of these youth to return to their parents' home or country of origin. After receiving a juvenile court order and applying for a special immigrant visa, SIJs may apply for lawful permanent resident (LPR) status (i.e., a green card). In 2008, Congress mandated that U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services adjudicate SIJ petitions within 180 days, given the immediacy of these children's needs. However, youth often wait for years as they are required to compete with adults for visas in the EB-4 category. The EB-4 category is also utilized by religious workers, members of the U.S. armed forces, noncitizens who have supplied information concerning a criminal organization or enterprise or a terrorist organization, enterprise, or operation, and others.

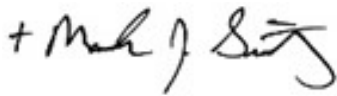
The delay in the adjudication of SIJ petitions, due to their shared reliance with non-humanitarian populations utilizing the EB-4 category, exacerbates the vulnerabilities that these youth experience. Dreams of pursuing higher education are stifled by FAFSA ineligibility, heavy mental burdens are imposed by the looming possibility of deportation, and exploitation and homelessness remain ever-present threats. Exempting SIJ applicants from the annual cap would put them on par with various other humanitarian classes who are exempt from the annual limitations in recognition of the fact that they are not employment-based immigrants.

The EB-4 backlog has been significantly worsened for all applicants from most countries, following a policy change recently and abruptly implemented by the U.S. Department of State earlier this year. EB-4 applicants from all countries, including immigrant religious workers, now have a wait time of five years—and likely longer. The USCCB recently emphasized this in a [letter to Secretary of State Blinken and Secretary of Homeland Security Mayorkas](#), joined by fifteen

other national organizations representing a diverse array of faith traditions. Religious workers provide innumerable services to American communities, including culturally competent religious instruction and rituals, as well as direct social services to those in need, usually without regard for the faith of those served. Unfortunately, the current situation violates both Congress' intent to provide religious organizations and our communities with needed workers and its express desire to protect vulnerable immigrant youth.

Your support for this minor legislative fix would have a major impact on the lives of these resilient young people, while making the EB-4 visa available for others, such as immigrant religious workers. For these reasons, we ask you to take up and pass the Protect Vulnerable Immigrant Youth Act without further delay.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark J. Seitz".

Most Reverend Mark J. Seitz
Bishop of El Paso
Chairman, USCCB Committee on Migration

CC: All U.S. Senators and Representatives