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Villaraigosa: don't punt on comprehensive immigration reform

January 14, 2013 | By Stephenie Overman | saoverman@gmail.com

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Congress faces an ambitious agenda, but immigration reform cannot wait another political season, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said Jan. 14 at a National Press Club luncheon.

"Some argue that immigration reform should be punted again. [But] Congress should be able to walk and chew gum at the same time," he said.

Comprehensive immigration reform "goes to the heart of who we are as a people," said Villaraigosa, who has served as mayor of Los Angeles since 2005. He was chairman of the 2012 Democratic National Convention and is a past president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

"We are a nation of immigrants. We have said if you work hard...doors will be open...you will achieve prosperity and dignity for yourself and your children."

The last two decades have been "long on enforcement but short on opportunity," he said. "Immigrants must take personal responsibility for their actions but we must provide a meaningful path forward," he added.

Villaraigosa noted that some people are calling for piecemeal reform, but said "the time for half measures" is over. "There can be no second class citizens in the United States of America," he said.

According to Villaraigosa, comprehensive reform should include:

- o A pathway to legal permanent residency and citizenship;
- o Legalization that is earned, but is not unattainable;
- o Family reunification as a priority; and
- o A verification system that rewards employees and employers who play by the rules.

The United States has the right to protect its borders, he said, but "we must protect our border through smart enforcement. The goal should be to remove real threats to our borders and in our country, not to deport people who...lack papers" but have not committed serious crimes.

Addressing audience questions about gun legislation, Villaraigosa called it "an abomination" that the United States does not have a national assault weapons ban. States' taking action is good, "but we need a comprehensive federal approach."

He called for universal background checks and better mental health services.

Asked if the National Rifle Association has cowed public officials, he said, "they use the second amendment to defend...what doesn't make sense to the vast majority of us. We have a responsibility to the victims of the massacre" at Sandy Hook Elementary School" and that responsibility is "safe gun legislation."

When asked about spending cuts, Villaraigosa said, "I don't believe we should cut across the board. We should cut strategically. We've got to address defense spending. I would start there. The mayors of the country want to see less spent on defense and more on bridges and highways and schools."

Addressing questions about whether he would run for governor of California or would accept a position in President Obama's cabinet, Villaraigosa said he intended to "focus on the job I've got" until his term is up in six months.



Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa

Photo/Image: Noel St. John

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