



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jacob Ashby

A Legislative Column From Sen. Jake Ashby

JACOB ASHBY August 18, 2023



To deter Central American refugees from seeking safe haven, he began a controversial policy of detaining them at the Southern border. He stoked outrage and shame by herding families into makeshift cages erected on concrete floors. He deported a staggering 3 million immigrants, more than any other U.S President.

Barack Obama was no immigration reformer.

MSNBC and Fox News will tell you differently, but here's the truth: no one party, no one figure, no branch of government is responsible for our national embarrassment of an immigration system. Failure on this scale requires years of bipartisan neglect and cynical political gamesmanship, reactionary executive patchwork replacing thoughtful congressional action.

It wasn't always like this. In 1953, President Eisenhower signed bipartisan legislation allowing 214,00 refugees fleeing Communist persecution to emigrate to the United States. It was an orderly process. Employment and housing were prearranged. The refugees settled near citizen sponsors all over the country.

Compare President Eisenhower's approach to President Biden's.

When migrants began fleeing Venezuela last spring, the President and congressional leaders should've developed a comprehensive plan detailing how many people we could accept, what federally funded services could be provided, and where they could be resettled without straining any one state or municipalities' capacity to help while asylum cases were adjudicated.

This did not happen. The President didn't really do anything.

He idly watched as immigration officials and governors shipped 100,000 migrants to New York City. He's brushed off Gov. Hochul's ideas to use federal assets for housing. And he's denied Mayor Adams' requests for funding and additional resources.

Beleaguered and out of good options, the mayor has chosen an especially terrible one: hiring a sleazy consulting firm to ship migrants to our Upstate communities without any notice, any communication or any detailed plan.

What should happen now?

In the short term, New Yorkers need the federal government to acknowledge that this crisis has been caused by federal failures and should be paid for by federal funds, not property taxpayers in Colonie, Rotterdam or Brooklyn for that matter. (If only the Democrats knew someone with some juice in the U.S. Senate...)

Additionally, downstate leaders must honor the resolutions passed by upstate counties and municipalities that simply do not have the resources to provide a complex array of social services for asylum seekers. Crushed by escalating Medicaid costs, a costly opioid epidemic and acute housing shortages, they're just not in a position to help solve an international crisis.

The federal government, however, is. It owns approximately 77,000 unoccupied buildings across the country. Why can't they be turned into asylum centers providing housing and support services? Why can't the federal government provide a waiver allowing these men and women to work while their cases are adjudicated?

Above all, this humanitarian crisis has proven that a broken immigration system provides everyone with exclusively bad options. Overly restrictive legal pathways tied up in red tape push far too many people to seek asylum. A backlog of 1.6 million asylum cases means desperate people resign themselves to living in the shadows as undocumented immigrants.

Perpetuating this status quo is good for talking heads who want to scare you on cable news and for immoral people who want to exploit a permanent underclass of workers who don't have rights. It's bad for everyone else.

This session, I helped pass bipartisan immigration reform in the Senate. The bill would expedite the naturalization process for the undocumented family members of servicemembers and veterans. We need lawmakers in Washington to embrace the same spirit of collaboration and finally deliver the commonsense immigration overhaul we've needed for decades.