Chairman Padilla, Ranking Member Cornyn, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the contributions of immigrant essential workers. Throughout the pandemic, farmworkers have performed essential work in the critical infrastructure sector of agriculture and food. Yet government policies on labor and immigration contribute to farmworkers’ low wages and dangerous working conditions. Undocumented farmworkers are especially vulnerable. There is an urgent need for Congress to pass legislation that grants them and their families a pathway to immigration status and citizenship.

An estimated 2.4 million farmworkers labor on the nation’s farms and ranches. The vast majority are immigrants and at least one-half are undocumented. Nearly 30% are women, and an estimated 4 out of 5 are Latino. Most have been living and working in the U.S. for more than 15 years. They are vital members of our communities.

Farmworkers are essential to our nation’s food and agriculture system. America's farms contribute about $136 billion to the U.S. economy. Farmworkers feed us.

I think we all remember the widespread fear of food shortages last year as grocery store shelves went bare. People who had never struggled to purchase food suddenly feared they wouldn’t be able to feed their families.

In response, the government designated farmworkers as essential workers. As other businesses shut down or shifted to telework, farmworkers were told to keep going to work, in person, on the nation’s farms and ranches.

Why? Because strawberries cannot be harvested -- and cows cannot be milked -- over Zoom.

In California, farmworkers showed up to work the state’s vast farms. Farmworkers showed up to the cotton fields and cattle ranches in Texas, dairies in Minnesota, peach orchards in South Carolina, sweet potato farms in North Carolina and the tobacco fields in Tennessee.

And what happened? Our food supply stabilized -- but COVID-19 wreaked havoc on farmworkers and their families. An estimated 577,000 agricultural workers have contracted COVID-19. One study found that food and agriculture workers suffered the highest "excess mortality" rate of any occupation in California. And many who survived the disease now face long-term health problems as a result.

Despite their essential contributions, farmworkers are excluded from many labor laws protecting workers in other industries. Too many employers chose not to provide farmworkers with CDC-recommended protections, including physical distancing in the fields and during transportation. Many farmworkers lacked face masks, adequate sanitary facilities, access to testing, paid leave, health insurance, and accurate information in a language they understand. Low wages force many farmworkers into crowded housing with shared sanitation facilities. And low incomes prevent many farmworkers from taking time off from work for COVID testing, doctor’s visits or vaccinations.
The broken immigration system has intensified the pandemic’s harms for undocumented farmworkers and their families. Undocumented immigrants are ineligible for most of the public benefits created to confront the pandemic. They often work in fear that they will be fired in retaliation for requesting safety precautions. Many undocumented farmworkers are reluctant to get tested, fearing that a positive result could cost them their job -- or that immigration enforcement agents might arrest them at a testing or vaccination site and separate them from their children.

My written testimony shares with you the story of Maria. She is a California farmworker who harvests fruits and vegetables and grafts almond trees. Maria continued working even when her employer failed to provide masks or other protective equipment because, she said, “we have children to support just like everyone else.” She and her husband tested positive for COVID-19. Maria had serious symptoms that made it impossible to continue in her job which required lifting 45-pound buckets of tomatoes. Without work, the family wondered how they would continue feeding their children. Unfortunately, Maria’s story is not unique.

In conclusion, the pandemic confirmed that immigrant farmworkers – many of them undocumented – are essential to our food system and our nation’s stability. They have labored through the pandemic to feed us and many have suffered greatly. In return, they deserve a greater measure of justice from our Government through:

- more effective responses to the pandemic,
- ending discriminatory labor laws, and
- reforming the immigration system to grant undocumented farmworkers and their families an opportunity to obtain immigration status and citizenship.

Thank you.

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Committee of the Judiciary
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