

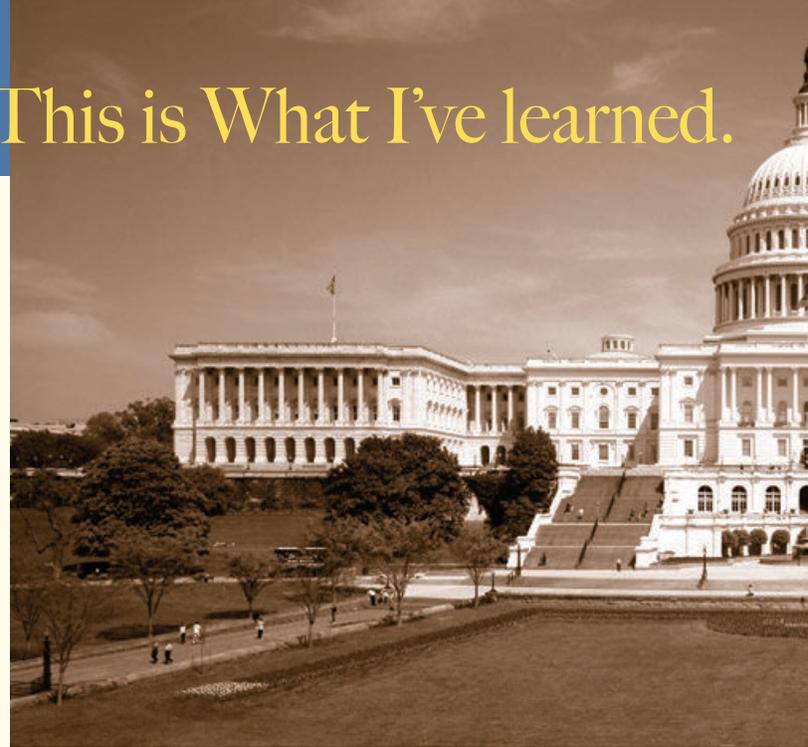
I Visited Congress, and This is What I've learned.

Aria Fani

On February 9, I accompanied a delegation from the San Francisco Bay Area headed to Washington, D.C., to urge lawmakers to support a pathway to residency for Temporary Protective Status (TPS) holders. TPS is a provisional designation given to 320,000 people from thirteen countries (later reduced to ten countries) who cannot return to their home countries due to natural disasters, violence, or other extraordinary circumstances. TPS has been canceled by the Trump administration as part of a much larger and methodically-executed plan to overhaul U.S. immigration laws. This is a clear abuse of presidential powers since the administration has by and large circumvented Congress, where immigration laws are debated and decided. This is precisely why we have seen so many legal challenges, some of which have reached the Supreme Court. The fate of TPS is also currently being fought in federal courts while the lives of more than a quarter million people and their families hang in the balance.

The cancellation of TPS has led to an incredible wave of civic mobilization on local and national levels. TPS holders, along with hundreds of their American allies, have formed dozens of local committees and come together on the national level to advocate for the rights of all TPS and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) holders. This year, they organized the second "People's TPS Summit" in Washington, D.C. In the U.S. capital, we joined more than 40 other TPS committees as part of an impressively well-planned series of workshops and cultural events designed to familiarize participants with the process of lobbying lawmakers. The summit had two main outcomes. The first was a march from the White House to Congress attended by 5,000 people which gained the support of freshmen lawmakers like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (New York) and Ayanna Pressley (Massachusetts). Concurrently with the march, each TPS committee met with its representatives in Congress.

Our delegation met with six representatives from California. They had the opportunity to hear the heartfelt testimonies of TPS holders speaking about how this program has allowed them to live and work in the U.S. legally for more than twenty years, how its cancellation would rip them apart from their American-born children, and how deporting a people so well integrated in the U.S. would put a huge economic burden on taxpayers. Facilitators who were in the meeting, such as myself, could have provided any set of statistics backing up those claims, but it was important for constituents to look their representatives in the eye and say: "I have been living in your district for two decades, I have paid taxes and abided by laws, I have worked hard and created a family here. Living in the U.S. is not a matter of preference for me; it is a matter of security and safety. I have flown three thousand miles to remind you what you are fighting for." Each testimony was a powerful moment and we were all privileged to witness it.



These personal testimonies, each pushing back tears and dark fears, gave representatives the collective dignity and moral clarity they need to fight for legislative justice for a group of non-citizen Americans who have lived among us for twenty years with no permanent status. If construction workers with no background in community organization can put together such an impressive, non-violent, and well-attended summit (while working full time), then our representatives can do what they were elected to do. And credit to them, these representatives listened empathetically and lauded the efforts of their constituents in channeling their energy into civic engagement and social advocacy. No democracy will remain functional if its corridors of power are only trafficked by lawmakers and politicians. It is upon us as Americans, with or without status, to pour into these corridors our energy for positive change, to raise our collective voice to give all politicians the impetus to fight for social justice.

The main slogan of the People's TPS Summit ushers a rising wave of an all-encompassing systemic reform in Washington, D.C.: Nothing About Us, Without Us. In 2016, millions of Americans cast their vote to reject establishment politics by voting for a candidate that posed as an outsider who would disrupt a system rigged against them. Instead, they got a





self-serving administration that is destroying the system instead of disrupting it. More Americans are now raising their collective voice against powerful lobbying groups, be it the gun lobby or big pharma, that are fighting hard to keep the status quo because it is designed to advantage them. Through corporate personhood, lobbies have methodically removed the American people from the table and instead have put them on the menu. The outcome? Our planet is being damaged for the gain of a select few companies. Our citizens are being gunned down and no action has been taken by our lawmakers so that gun manufacturers continue to hear the deafening rings of their soaring sales. Stagnant wages have broken the middle class because unions have very little power to fight for workers. These fights are interconnected by a single most dignified slogan: Nothing About Us, Without Us.

Fighting for TPS is all but one front of a much larger battle for economic and racial justice in this country, and the American people understand that very well. In D.C., I met a Salvadoran TPS holder from Omaha. When he told me he lived in Nebraska, I immediately sighed and proclaimed that he, unlike California TPS holders, must have no allies. His answer delighted me. He replied that his boss, a Trump supporter, told him he would do anything to get his employee a permanent status. When he told

his boss that he was considering heading to D.C. to participate in the People's TPS Summit, his boss encouraged him to go and even offered him financial support. We might have seen this man on TV in a rally cheering and chanting for the President. He might agree with this administration's stance on immigration. But he still had the practical wisdom to support an immigrant whom he has come to know as a human being, a hard-working and honest worker.

Instead of having a humane and reasonable debate about the need for comprehensive immigration reform, this administration has created an echo chamber where asylum seekers, documented TPS holders, gang members, and drug traffickers are all seen as a single (racial) group. This group is then strategically and shamelessly blamed in rallies for increasing economic disparity and crime. The formula is hardly subtle: turn mob mentality into political victory. But it is deeply heartening that even during such a dark climate, this Nebraskan employer has risen above politics of demonization to value the labor and dignity of an immigrant from El Salvador. This encounter complicated my assumptions. It also taught me that echo chambers can be dangerous because so many voices get overshadowed by a single loudmouth in the room.

I returned home from Washington understanding that this is the beginning of our fight. Should there be no legislative solution to this humanitarian crisis, nearly three hundred thousand American-born children may get ripped apart from their families starting this September. Inflicting this unnecessary cruelty on immigrant communities will not make Americans feel safer or more prosperous. It leaves a quarter million Americans with the false choice of following their parents to crime-infested countries that they have never known or staying behind with no family. This policy change makes our communities significantly less safe and less prosperous. Without building a single mile of his promised wall, this President has already separated thousands of families seeking asylum in the United States and now he is hellbent on tearing families apart here at home. The People's TPS Summit gives us a noble cause to fight for. You do not need to travel to Washington, D.C., to understand that our immigration system is broken. It is designed to abuse and hurt the people who have carried this country forward and, alternatively, to work perfectly for a select few self-serving investors who have no loyalty to the U.S. or its people. It is unsurprising that our immigration system is not remotely in lockstep with the views of ordinary Americans, Democrat or Republican.

Please call your representatives and urge them to support a pathway to residency for DACA and TPS holders by voting yes on any of the following bills: the Dream and Promise Act of 2019 (H.R. 6), the SECURE Act (S. 2144), and the Dream Act of 2019 (S. 874)

Images: The TPS National Alliance Delegation at the U.S. Congress

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