

# Marking Immigrant Heritage Month

Some near US border see strength in diversity

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La Voz  
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PHOENIX – For more than a decade, the U.S. has celebrated National Immigrant Heritage Month, a commemoration throughout June that aims to celebrate, honor and educate others on the contributions that immigrants have made to the country.

This year, like many years, the celebration is bittersweet, as communities in Arizona and across the U.S. grapple with a new executive order targeting asylum seekers and a state ballot initiative focused on expelling undocumented immigrants.

“This month, we honor the contributions and celebrate the remarkable courage of our Nation’s immigrants, whose hopes and dreams helped found this country and continue to push us forward today,” President Joe Biden said in a proclamation issued May 31 on the monthlong observance, the third consecutive one he’s issued since 2022.

“On day one of my Administration, I sent a comprehensive plan to the Congress to fix our broken immigration system. It aimed to expand legal pathways of immigration; provide protections for Dreamers and others who contribute to this country; and address the violence, corruption, and instability that leads many to flee their homes,” the proclamation reads.

On June 4, days after the proclamation was issued, Biden signed an executive order restricting asylum cases when the southern border with Mexico experiences a high number of migrant encounters – a decision that provoked strong criticism from both sides of the aisle as well as immigrant rights groups.

That same day, the Arizona House of Representatives approved a collection of initiatives that would target undocumented immigrants in the state, which has been considered an even more aggressive approach to the controversial 2010 “show me your papers” law. The approval in the House gave the measure



Jesus Villegas and Jayden De La Rosa break for lunch during a rally at the Arizona state Capitol on May 14 in Phoenix. MARK HENLE/ARIZONA REPUBLIC

a clear path to appear on the November ballot.

According to the American Immigration Council, immigrants make up 13% of Arizona’s population, or 1 in every 8 residents. They account for 20% of the state’s business owners – nearly one-third when it comes to Phoenix metro.

With recent events, local activists and organizations have taken the news as an opportunity to highlight the importance of this month and recognize how fundamental the immigrant community is to the country.

In 2014, the I Stand With Immigrants/I Am An Immigrant Initiative launched the first Immigrant Heritage Month to celebrate the diverse cultures and experiences and build community among immigrants.

For the past 10 years, the initiative – powered by the immigrant advocacy nonprofit FWD.us Education Fund Inc. – has hosted events in major U.S. cities. It has collaborated with local restaurants and food trucks to showcase immigrant cuisine, created campaigns with celebrities like Pitbull and Lupita Nyong’o to bring awareness to the young holiday and encouraged the community to demand change from lawmakers.

This messaging resonates strongly with Arizona’s growing population.

“This month, I think it’s a great opportunity for us to shine light that immigrants are human beings that live in Arizona,” said Reyna Montoya, founder and CEO of Aliento, an organization that supports immigrant and mixed-status families with necessary resources.

“We’re so interconnected in our communities,” she said, adding that immigrants take part in all sectors of society, “from volunteering at church or school, to having the younger ones going to school who are going to be our future doctors and teachers.”

According to the Migration Policy Institute, the immigrant population in Arizona has grown by 346% since 1990, from 278,205 to 962,688 in 2022. And despite its sordid past with the controversial “show me your papers” law, Arizona has seen several policies protecting immigrants enacted in the state and in the U.S. – a sign of shifting sentiment, from the enactment of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, in 2012, to the passing of a state law in 2021 that allows consular registration cards to be used as a form of identification.

The decision whether to pass the latest package of initiatives will be up to Arizona voters in the November general election. And if history is any indication, voters could reject it. In 2022, Ari-

zonans voted in support of a proposition that allows certain undocumented students to be eligible for in-state tuition.

“We think about immigration or immigrants as a political component or about partisanship, but we’re talking about human beings,” Montoya said.

Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs has been vocal about immigrants’ rights and their contributions to the state’s economy and culture and has pushed back against Republican-backed immigration bills that seek to make federal immigration law a state issue.

Arizona does not officially recognize June as Immigrant Heritage Month, although Democratic members of its Legislature tried in 2020 and again in 2021 to make it an official observation via concurrent resolutions in the Arizona Senate.

Several organizations in Arizona advocate for migrant rights. Among them is Living United for Change in Arizona, or LUCHA, which has fought against proposals targeting immigrants throughout this legislative session.

On Wednesday, the group filed a lawsuit in an effort to prevent a Republican-led measure – one that would make crossing the border illegally a state crime – from appearing on the November ballot. Other organizations like Aliento, which are also active in protests and demonstrations, focus their efforts on hosting workshops throughout the month to help those struggling with mental health, which can be higher among immigrant communities, especially given recent events.

“This week has been very heavy,” Montoya said. “Policies like (Arizona’s proposed one) can really be separating families. So rather than only focusing on the pain, (the holiday month is about) being able to illustrate what this means for immigrant communities.”

Poder Latinx, an organization that aims to build political power among the Latinx community, is using this month to prepare for the ballot in November.

“It’s (about) really incorporating these holidays to mobilize our community to engage, to educate our folks on what’s coming up in November,” said Yadira Sanchez, executive director of Poder Latinx.