



COMMONWEALTH OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS
Office of the Governor
Office of the Press Secretary

Caller Box 10007 • Saipan, MP 96950 • Tel: (670) 237-2234 • Fax: (670) 664-2211 • kevin.bautista@gov.mp

PRESS RELEASE
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NMI US Workforce Act of 2018 now law

After more than two years of discussions between the CNMI and the Federal Government, Governor Ralph DLG. Torres announced this morning that President Donald J. Trump has signed into law H.R. 5956, the Northern Mariana Islands US Workforce Act of 2018.

“Finally, after more than two years of constructive conversations between our Commonwealth and our federal counterparts in the White House and in Congress, I am proud to announce that the White House informed me this morning that H.R. 5956, the Northern Mariana Islands US Workforce Act of 2018, is now officially law. This process was not easy, and we knew heading into it that there would be uncertainty along the way, but I am proud to say that we have accomplished something that will benefit all of us. This is truly the result of hard work contributed by everyone in our community. I want to thank President Donald J. Trump and his administration for their commitment to developing a US workforce and for giving us a seat at the table in these important discussions for the continued success of our Commonwealth. I want to especially thank Congressman Rob Bishop and Senator Lisa Murkowski, who both introduced the final formulation of the bill and championed our cause in Washington. I also want to thank the Northern Marianas Business Alliance Corporation, which advocated for our large and small businesses, our Washington staffer Jason Osborne, our Legislature, and most importantly, the entire community for working with my team and I to make our case to the Federal Government. This is a victory for the Commonwealth,” Governor Torres said.

The new law raises the number of CW visas to 13,000 extends the CW permit program through 2029 and further strengthens ongoing local initiatives to develop the CNMI’s US workforce.

“Today in the Marianas, we can celebrate this accomplishment with the understanding that we must continue to train our people, give them the skills to thrive in our growing economy, and take greater part in contributing to even greater levels of success,” Governor Torres added.

The law fixes reductions made by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), which had implemented policies dating back to the Obama administration to reduce the number of CW workers through 2019 in accordance with Public Law 110-229.

Since the summer of 2016, discussions about a long-term solution to the CW program began between Governor Torres and congressional leaders in both the House and Senate about a long-term solution to the CW program through the Section 902 Consultations between the CNMI and the US. The consultations resulted in the first report in history approved by both the CNMI and

the White House and transmitted to Congress in January 2017. It provided a framework for workforce policy discussions between the CNMI and the US to this day.

“The 902 report was the culmination of our islands’ strongest efforts to advocate for the needs of our economy and the potential for even greater opportunity for our US Workers. The months that followed led to the final formulation of a bill, introduced and championed by friends of the CNMI, the Honorable Congressman Rob Bishop and the Honorable Senator Lisa Murkowski, both of whom led congressional delegations to visit the Marianas over the last two years,” Governor Torres said.

Senator Murkowski, who chairs the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, created the congressional working group in July 2017 to initiate discussions on Governor Torres’ recommendations toward legislation that would develop the US workforce substantially over time, secure the CNMI’s ability to grow its economy, and ensure that legacy foreign workers will not be capped out during the annual renewal process. Chairman Bishop was also a member of the working group.

In December 2017, Governor Torres with members of the Northern Marianas Business Alliance then met with Senator Murkowski and members of the working group to help move the bill further. Following the December meeting, Governor Torres worked closely with the working group resulting in the introduction of S. 2325 in January 2018.

The Office of the Governor and the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources remained in direct communication after the introduction of the bill and through the Senate hearing of the bill on February 6, 2018. Governor Torres, joined by Congressman Angel A. Demapan, also met with senators on the committee and the Office of Speaker Paul Ryan regarding the bill.

While two bills were co-introduced in both the House and the Senate, it was only S. 2325 that was amended to reflect new language that directly addressed the needs of the CNMI. As a result, Senator Murkowski’s bill became the primary piece of legislation.

In late February, Governor Torres invited Senator Murkowski to the CNMI for a firsthand view of the CNMI economy. Senator Murkowski’s visit in March helped provide a clear picture of the CNMI economy and its challenges toward even greater levels of success in the CNMI. This eventually led to the passage of S. 2325 in the Senate in April.

After a parliamentary concern over the bill’s revenue provisions within the anti-fraud fee, Chairman Bishop then reintroduced in the House in late May as H.R. 5956. Since all revenue-generating bills must originate in the House, the language was then fully incorporated into this new version so that we can get it through the House as soon as possible then onto the Senate. The bill is also renamed to include “of 2018” in the short title to distinguish it from the various other versions of the bill floating around Congress.

H.R. 5956 includes the original text of the recently passed S. 2325 in the Senate, along with the blue-slipped language negotiated by the Office of the Governor, the Office of Senator Murkowski,

and the Department of Homeland Security and cleared by the House Committee on Ways and Means.

The Bishop-Murkowski bill then went to the White House on July 13, 2018 for President Trump's action, which ultimately led to the President signing the bill into law today.

Governor Torres has been in contact with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), namely the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), regarding new regulations of the CW program once the bill is enacted into law. The Governor's recommendations and concerns have been forwarded to USCIS and will allow for a more effective coordination of the program. The goal continues to be developing the CNMI's US workforce substantially over time, securing the CNMI's ability to grow and stabilize its economy, and ensuring that legacy foreign workers will not be capped out during the annual renewal process.

“During my short time as Governor, I've learned that nothing ever comes easy. It took a collective effort by an entire community to get it done, despite the uncertainties and roadblocks created by folks that did not want to see us reach this goal or see our economy continue to be viable. This work will always be about advocating for the people in our villages who are actively trying to find a job in our growing economy, our small local businesses that have to make difficult choices, and families and friends that have been affected already. This bill will address our community's concerns by ensuring that there is effective wage protection for US workers, an acknowledgement of our long-term guest workers, additional time to allow for the construction and progress of our islands to continue, and stronger safeguards against bad actors in our economy. We will continue to make sure that every able-bodied and willing local worker on island has access to a job in order to be self-sufficient, and we will continue to work towards saving our economy because it provides more opportunities for everyone to succeed as it grows. At the end of the day, this work will always be for every single person who calls these islands home.”

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