

Brian Maas, Maryanne Stevens and Timothy F. McNeil: Don't end protected status

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Maas is bishop of the Nebraska Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Stevens is president of the College of St. Mary and McNeil is chancellor of the Omaha Archdiocese.

Temporary Protected Status is a lesser-known immigration designation established by Congress in 1990 that confers legal status to individuals in the United States when their home country is too unsafe for them to return. Armed conflict such as civil war, environmental disaster, an epidemic or other extraordinary conditions that prevent people from safely returning home are circumstances under which persons from a foreign country are eligible for TPS.

Foreign nationals from about 10 countries, including South Sudan, Yemen, Syria and Somalia, have TPS, but the largest numbers are from El Salvador (263,000), Honduras (83,000) and Haiti (59,000). It is estimated that 3,000 persons with TPS live in Nebraska, the majority of whom are Salvadoran.

Residents with TPS can work in the United States without fear of deportation, but TPS does not provide a path to citizenship. TPS lasts from six to 18 months and must be extended by the secretary of homeland security, with input from the U.S. State and Justice Departments. Each person with TPS is required to submit to a rigorous vetting process every 18 months.

Nebraskans with TPS pay taxes, own homes and often work in the most challenging jobs — many of them in meatpacking plants. They are active in their churches and children's schools and are established members of our communities.

A common misconception is that immigrants do not pay taxes. Not true, as the recent World-Herald column by Erin Grace about Wilfredo Rivera of El Salvador illustrated. Immigrants with TPS pay income taxes, property taxes, gasoline taxes and taxes on their vehicles.

In fact, they pay payroll taxes, which fund Social Security and Medicare, despite the fact that they are not eligible for Social Security when they retire. In fact, the Immigrant Legal Resource Center found that ending TPS would result in a loss of \$6.9 billion in contributions to Social Security and Medicare over the next decade.

The Trump administration has signaled that it may end TPS, which would affect more than 400,000 persons. We disagree with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and believe that Haiti, El Salvador and Honduras remain unable to accept tens of thousands of people from the United States. As a result of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, 55,000 people remain without permanent housing, and the cholera epidemic which followed the earthquake continues.

Both of Florida's U.S. senators and all of the South Florida congressional representatives have asked the Department of Homeland Security to extend TPS for Haitians for 18 months. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued an extensive report on TPS in October, after a delegation traveled to El Salvador and Honduras in August. El Salvador and Honduras remain two of the most violent countries in the world.

The delegation found that entire families and even entire communities are targeted for violence in both countries because of drug trafficking and gang activity that are largely fueled by the U.S. drug trade. The archbishop of San Salvador reported that six persons from a single parish were murdered by "stabbing, dismemberment or firearms."

He also expressed concern that American-born children who would return with their parents to El Salvador or Honduras could be "sought-after targets for extortion and gang violence."

The Conference of Catholic Bishops cited endemic violence, the large number of internally displaced persons due to this violence and the lack of infrastructure to handle returning populations adequately when they called for the TPS extension. Further, they recommended that Congress provide a legislative solution that would confer permanent lawful status for persons who now have TPS.

We agree. Omaha Together One Community and people of faith call on the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to extend this program for all persons with Temporary Protected Status for another 18 months, which would allow Congress time to deliberate and enact fair legislation that would provide a safe and certain future for these Nebraskans.