for 6 years, Republicans had the opportunity to bring together a conversation around comprehensive immigration reform, and they didn't. Hopefully, we will have the opportunity to do that now.

Lastly, behind every single one of these individuals coming to the border is a story, is a real human being. Ask yourself, if your child were being recruited into vicious drug gangs with a high likelihood of serious harm or death, would you not take steps to keep your child safe? Would you not bring them to a place like America that was safer for that child?

I visited, on Friday, the southwest border. I was in El Paso with a group of bipartisan colleagues and Secretary Mayorkas, who is doing a good job, who is managing this emergency with skill. I met a little girl, about 13 years old, who was in one of these processing facilities waiting to be moved into the asylum process. She was truly scared. She was truly scared. She knew she was going to have a chance to reunite with her family in the United States, but these detention centers—they are better than they were in 2019, but they are no place for kids.

That little girl was coming from Guatemala, a place where there are certain neighborhoods that are more violent than any war zone in the Middle East, a place where murder rates eclipse anything we can even imagine in the United States.

So that little girl, she needs America to survive, but I would argue that America needs her more because without her and the thousands of other children arriving at our border, hungry for a better life, we are going to risk abandoning the entire original idea of this great, one-of-a-kind Nation, a Nation that opens its arms to those who are fleeing violence and desperation. It is not just our tradition; it is our definition as a country—more reason for those of us in the U.S. Senate to resist the temptation to play politics with these kids' lives and with the very complicated, nuanced, important issue of immigration and instead find ways to be truthful about what is happening at the border as a means to come together and do something about it.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

PPP EXTENSION ACT OF 2021

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, I rise today to urge swift passage of the PPP Extension Act, which will extend the March 31 deadline for the Paycheck Protection Program 2 months, to May 31, and give the SBA an additional month, through June 30, to process any backlogged applications.

This Saturday, March 27, will be the 1-year date since the CARES Act was enacted. In that time, SBA has approved 8.2 million PPP loans worth more than $715 billion.

These loans have saved small businesses throughout our Nation. They would not be here today but for this program. It also saved the stress on our unemployment insurance system by keeping small business employees on the payroll. And as I am sure the Presiding Officer knows, for a small business, it is difficult to find a workforce and to keep a workforce, and the Paycheck Protection Program allowed small businesses to maintain their workforce so that when the pandemic is over, they are going to be ready for our growing economy.

The world feels a little different today than it did a year ago. The American people are finally beginning to see a light at the end of the tunnel. More than 124 million vaccine doses have been administered, and public health officials nationwide are beginning to ease restrictions on public gatherings.

We can see a light at the end of the tunnel, but we are not there yet. Small businesses are struggling, but in spite of those struggles, small businesses are still showing up for our communities.

The Baltimore Sun recently published a story about a restaurant in my hometown of Baltimore that captured the essence of the value that small businesses bring to our communities.

Steve Chu and Ephrem Abebe, coowners of the popular restaurant in Baltimore named Ekiben, recently drove 6 hours from Baltimore to Vermont to prepare a meal for a longtime customer who was on her deathbed. They did this at their own cost because that is what small business owners do. They are part of our community. Afterward, Mr. Chu and Mr. Abebe called the decision a ''no-brainer'' and viewed their trip as a way to say thank you to a customer who had supported them for years.

That is what makes small businesses special. They are more than places we go to buy products or enjoy a meal. They are vital pillars in our community. That story and countless others like it are why we passed the PPP program initially and why we must pass the PPP Extension Act—so PPP can continue to be a lifeline for small businesses in the coming months.

Congress and the Biden administration have implemented significant improvements to the PPP in recent months that have made the program more equitable and useful. So we must now extend the deadline to allow small businesses and nonprofits to take full advantage and receive the help that they need.

In December, Congress passed the bipartisan Economic Aid Act, which provided an additional $284 billion to PPP and made second-round PPP loans available to small businesses that had spent their initial PPP loan and can demonstrate a 25-percent loss in revenue. The bill also expanded eligibility of PPP to include certain local newspapers, TV stations and radio stations, as well as 501(c)6 nonprofits.

I must remind my colleagues that while the SBA was beginning to implement the improvements we made to the PPP in the Economic Aid Act, the Agency was also undergoing a transition from the Trump administration to the Biden administration. Transitions, even under the best circumstances, can be disruptive to an Agency's work.

On February 22, the Biden administration took strong action to get funding to small businesses that were either left out or underfunded during prior rounds of PPP. The administration implemented a 14-day exclusive window for small businesses with fewer than 20 employees. It updated the maximum loan calculation formula for sole proprietors, and it eliminated rules prohibiting small businesses owned by formerly incarcerated individuals and individuals with delinquent Federal student loans from securing a PPP loan.

It made it possible and much more worthwhile for small businesses to apply for PPP loans, but it takes time. PPP is a forgivable loan, but you have to have a financial institution to make that loan. It has to be processed, it has to be approved, and it can't be done by the end of this month.

During the exclusivity period, SBA approved PPP loans for more than 400,000 small businesses and nonprofits with fewer than 20 employees, nearly half of which were first-time borrowers. We are reaching the hard to serve, the most needy of the small businesses. They finally got help.

Earlier this month, we passed the historic American Rescue Plan. The plan expanded PPP eligibility even more, to include more nonprofits as well as digital news platforms. The plan provides overdue aid to the local chapters of large nonprofits, such as the YMCA and Goodwill, which had not had prior access to PPP due to having multiple locations totaling more than 500 employees. The plan makes these nonprofits eligible for PPP loans worth up to $10 million, as long as each location does not exceed the employee limit. That makes sense.

During a hearing examining PPP last week, the small business community heard testimony from John Hoey, who leads the YMCA chapter that serves the Baltimore region. John urged us to extend the PPP to give nonprofit leaders more time to understand the program. He said:

> I can tell you that colleagues of mine who run large Ys around the country and large nonprofits in Baltimore are still trying to understand the program and figure out if they qualify. I think a 3-month extension is not only warranted but owed to all of us after what we've been through this past year.

We also heard testimony from Lisa Mensah, who leads the Opportunity Finance Network, which is the national

association of CDFIs, our mission lenders. She warned us that ''thousands of business owners will not receive access to PPP without an extension.''

She told us about a CDFI in Jackson, MS, that estimates that 1,300 loans from small businesses that applied for PPP will not receive funds if we do not extend the deadline. Of these 1,300 applicants, 98 percent are businesses with fewer than 20 employees, 95 percent are minority-owned, and nearly 100 of them are veteran- or veteran-spouse-owned small businesses.

This is only one CDFI out of hundreds nationwide. The story will be repeated—those that have been left out. The committee has also been urged to extend the deadline by the business community. On March 15, more than 90 chambers of commerce, trade groups, and business organizations sent a letter urging extension, and they said:

> Nearly one year into the COVID–19 pandemic, the continued liquidity challenges of the small business sector are acute.

It is clear that there is still an overwhelming need for PPP loans, which is why the PPP Extension Act passed the House of Representatives by a 415-to-3 vote. This is bipartisan. The bill that we are talking about is sponsored by Senator COLLINS. Senator SHAHEEN and I are also on that bill.

The good news is that the resources are there. We have been informed by the SBA that the extension of the deadline can work within the funds that have already been made available by Congress. The money is there.

This is not the first time we have done this. I must remind my colleagues that, last year, as PPP was approaching its deadline, I brought a bill to the floor of the Senate and worked with Senator RUBIO to give small businesses more time to get their applications filed. I must also remind my colleagues that we passed that extension to preserve access to PPP while we continued negotiating on broader changes to the program. We need to do the same thing again.

I know that there are other modifications to the program that we will have an opportunity to discuss, and I am committed to conducting those discussions in the same bipartisan manner that I have approached the development of these programs. In fact, later today, in just 45 minutes, there will be a hearing of the Small Business Committee where we will be doing oversight on the programs that we made available during COVID–19, and we will have representatives from government responsible for those programs, including the SBA.

But the bottom line: We first need to extend the program. We have got to make sure it doesn't expire next week. We must get this done. The need is there, and the funds are there.

EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT

Mr. President, I rise to celebrate Women's History Month and support S.J. Res. 1, legislation I introduced with my partner in this effort, Senator MURKOWSKI of Alaska.

Our bipartisan legislation would remove the deadline for the States' ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, the ERA, and I am pleased that the House adopted the companion version of this legislation, H.J. Res. 17, last week. I now urge the Senate to take up and pass this legislation.

Ratification of the ERA would expressly prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex in the U.S. Constitution. The amendment simply reads:

> Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

In January 2020, Virginia became the 38th State to ratify the ERA, which was first proposed in 1972. Congress has the authority under article V of the Constitution to set and change deadlines for the ratification of constitutional amendments and has done so on numerous occasions. Recall that, in 1992, the 27th amendment of the Constitution, prohibiting immediate congressional pay raises, was successfully ratified after 203 years. That amendment was initially proposed as part of the original Bill of Rights in 1789.

There should be no time limit on equality. Even as we celebrate America's first female Vice President, our Nation is held back as the only modern Constitution that fails to enshrine full equality for both men and women. This is unacceptable. Most Americans are surprised to learn that the ERA is not already part of the U.S. Constitution. The States have done their job to make this happen. Now Congress must finally do its job and remove any legal obstacle to certifying the ERA.

Women were indeed left out of the Constitution intentionally by our Founding Fathers. American women, however, did demand equality as our country was being founded. In a letter in March 1776, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband John Adams, urging him and other members of the Continental Congress not to forget about the Nation's women. The future First Lady wrote, in part:

> I long to hear that you have declared an independence. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into of the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.

Sadly, the Founding Fathers did not heed Abigail Adams' call. Most notably, women were denied the right to vote for nearly 150 years. More broadly, women were treated as second-class citizens through our Nation's history and were denied other basic and fundamental rights, such as being able to own property or work in their chosen occupation.

Women comprise a majority of the underrepresented in government, elected office, the courts, and the business world. Without the ERA in the Constitution, the statutes and case law that have produced major advances in women's rights since the middle of the last century are vulnerable to being ignored, weakened, or even reversed.

Congress can amend or repeal antidiscrimination laws by a simple majority. A new administration can fail to vigorously enforce civil rights statutes. The Supreme Court can use a lower standard of intermediate scrutiny to permit certain regressive forms of sex discrimination.

Indeed, even today, women do not receive equal pay for equal work. The ERA would provide a needed constitutional basis for legislation advancing women's equality. Historically, the equal protection of the laws clause of the 14th Amendment has been used to fight discrimination on the basis of gender. However, without language in the Constitution specifically establishing that there shall be no denial or abridgement of rights on the basis of sex, the Supreme Court will likely continue to apply a lower level of scrutiny in cases related to discrimination against women. By contrast, the Supreme Court uses the ''strict scrutiny'' test in reviewing cases of racial and religious discrimination.

As former Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, a fervent originalist, once stated, ''Certainly the Constitution does not require discrimination on the basis of sex. The only issue is whether it prohibits it. It doesn't.

Former Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg stated:

> Every constitution written since the end of World War II includes a provision that men and women are citizens of equal stature. Ours does not. . . . If I could choose an amendment to add to the Constitution, it would be the Equal Rights Amendment. I would like my granddaughters, when they pick up the Constitution, to see that notion—that women and men are persons of equal stature—I'd like them to see that in a basic principle of our society.

Public polling indicates that the country is ready for the ERA. Today, nearly half the States—including Maryland and Alaska—have a version of the ERA written into their State constitutions. In the era of ''Me Too,'' there has been a renewed energy for adopting the ERA, as society finally addresses the longstanding problems of violence and sexual harassment against women and demanding justice and accountability.

Just a few weeks ago, we celebrated International Women's Day worldwide, on March 8, with the 2021 theme: ''Choose to Challenge.'' It is now far past the time we bring the conversation of women's equality and empowerment to center stage.

The United States of America is one of the most developed, wealthiest, and admired countries in the world today, and immigrants from all over the world continue to travel to the United States to pursue their dreams and make a better life for themselves and their families. However, to this very day, the