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## MORE WORKER VISAS FOR LESS GOVERNMENT

*A federalist plan to address the growing U.S. labor shortage.*

Opinion

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The biggest labor story this Labor Day is the trouble that employers are having finding workers across the country. Friday's report of a modest gain of only 156,000 new jobs in August doesn't change that reality even though the jobless rate rose a tick to 4.4 percent

There are many reasons for the shortage, including drug use among the young, the disincentive to work due to easier disability and the skills mismatch between what employers need and what kids learn in poor K-12 public schools. But the shortage will increase if the economy grows faster, so it's good news that some in Congress have ideas to mitigate labor shortages in fields like construction and technology.

Senator Ron Johnson (R., Wis.) recently introduced a bill that would allow states to start visa programs for foreign guest workers that are currently managed by the federal government. The State-Sponsored Visa Pilot Program Act would allow for about 500,000 visas, with 5,000 for each state and the rest divvied up by population. The cap would be indexed to GDP growth. States would be free to decide which skill levels or industries would be eligible – and free not to participate in the program. Rep. Ken Buck (R., Colo.) is working on companion legislation.

Such visas might alleviate a shortage of farm hands in places like California's Central Valley, which is leaving millions in crops to rot unharvested even as employers are raising wages and offering benefits. In Sen. Johnson's Wisconsin, the unemployment rate is 3.2 percent, and manufacturers report thousands of openings. Wisconsin's boat industry is hunting for mechanics; a state vocational school in Ashland reports that employers around the country are bidding for its graduates in marine mechanics.

The Johnson bill would permit workers to change employers, which would force companies to bid for workers. A worker who came from Canada or elsewhere would not be eligible for welfare such as food stamps. Also, included: Restrictions for states whose workers are routinely discovered as working illegally outside the sponsor state.

Legislators in Colorado (jobless rate: 2.4 percent) and Utah (3.5 percent) have in past years passed measures to start state worker programs, as a Cato Institute brief on the bill points out, though the federal government has refused to grant legal clarity. The American Action Forum's Jacqueline Varas reports that allowing state programs would create 900,000 to 1.2 million jobs – for American workers. Bringing in workers from abroad allows companies to grow and expand opportunities for U.S. citizens.

Another benefit would be political accountability. Voters could hold their governors and state legislators responsible for success or failure. The idea also concedes the reality that the labor market in Fort Wayne, Indiana, differs from the one in Silicon Valley. States are better able to notice which industries need workers, and tailor the visa eligibility accordingly.

Congress has tied itself in knots for years over immigration because the Members insist on trying to move grand bills to settle every issue rather than discrete bills to address specific problems. The bills collapse of their own weight. Sen. Johnson's idea would be a good start in addressing the urgent problem of America's labor shortage.