

Immigration Policies Outdated

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Health care reform, economic stimulus, financial regulation, unemployment. With so many issues on the front burner in Washington, it's easy to lose sight of immigration reform. But whether lawmakers are paying attention or not, the immigration system remains broken — and the unwelcome consequences affect everyone in New Mexico.

Consequence No. 1: There is a very large number of unauthorized immigrants in the United States; by some estimates, 11 million people. Most of them are working and contributing to the economy, but the fact that they are unauthorized makes a mockery of the rule of law.

New Mexicans always have been welcoming to immigrants from our southern neighbor, perhaps because of heritage and cultural ties with native Hispanics. However welcoming we are, we would still like to see all people living in New Mexico counted, taxed, and in this country legally.

Consequence No. 2: The current system creates fear and divisiveness.

Those who live here without proper authorization, even if the sole reason was to avoid starvation, must live in daily fear of being detected and arrested. And their children, many who reside here legally, are fearful they will be separated from their parents.

Employers who obey the letter of the law and check documents live with the fear that some of their employees may be here illegally with false documents, and they will suffer the loss of these trained employees or be characterized unfairly as intentionally hiring unauthorized immigrants.

Hispanics are fearful they may be overly scrutinized when being hired because of their ethnicity.

Government policy should not create fear among law abiding people.

Consequence No. 3: the impact on the New Mexico economy — including a potential obstacle to economic recovery.

According to one New Mexico business owner, Shayne Franzoy of Hatch, it's all but impossible to get enough labor for his farming operation: "Even with the unemployment numbers we're seeing today, the truth is we still can't find enough field workers. My goal is to always employ Americans first, but without immigrants, my business simply can't survive during the busy harvest season.

"I need a way to hire foreign workers legally. Without that, when the economy picks up, I may have to close my doors. And that will mean fewer opportunities for everyone, Americans and immigrants, in Hatch."

These and other immigration horror stories point to a system that just doesn't work — for anyone in our state. It's a system created for a different time, and one that must be modernized.

That's why we, a broad array of New Mexico business leaders, are standing up together in support of comprehensive immigration reform. We represent a broad diversity of economic sectors in the state — white-collar, blue-collar and "green-collar."

We all have a stake in fixing the immigration system because it's holding back the state economy. As New Mexico approaches 9 percent unemployment and is seeing our economy in the worst shape it has been in for decades, we know we need to do everything possible to rev up this economy and put people back to work.

Many people assume low-skilled immigrants take jobs from American workers. But actually the opposite is true.

Even in the downturn, higher-skilled New Mexico residents haven't shown much interest in the low-skilled jobs many immigrants do. The experience of many employers is that few native born New Mexicans will actually take some of the more difficult or lower-paying jobs.

If anything, many immigrant workers create jobs for Americans. Because immigrants are generally different from U.S. workers — sometimes less educated, sometimes more, often more willing to travel long distances for a short-term or seasonal job — the work they do generally complements and sustains employment for the native born.

According to testimony by Microsoft's Bill Gates, every visa for a high-skilled immigrant is linked to creation of five additional jobs in the United States. And according to agricultural economists, every farm job, many of which are filled by foreign workers, supports 3.5 non-farm jobs, typically filled by U.S. citizens.

In other words, immigration is a job multiplier — the kind of job multiplier we desperately need to grow the economy and climb out of the recession.

What kind of immigration reform does New Mexico need from Washington? We endorse secure borders, more realistic immigration quotas and protection for employers trying to meet the demands of the law.

Bottom line: Congress must create a way for the foreign workers we need to keep New Mexico businesses open and growing to enter the country legally. Our country's vast unauthorized workforce, the environment of fear, the employers struggling to keep their businesses open and worrying about how to grow them as the economy picks up — the status quo is unacceptable.

In New Mexico, business leaders are standing up to demand change. We hope our leaders in Washington are listening.

This column was also signed by Albuquerque Hispano Chamber of Commerce Director Alex Romero, NAWBO Public Policy Committee member Samantha Lapin, New Mexico Restaurant Association President Carol Wight, Dairy Producers of New Mexico Director Sharon Lombardi. Gene Baca is also chairman of the Association for Commerce and Industry.