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EDITORIAL: REFORMS FOR WORK VISAS

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The debate about immigration reform has properly focused on giving the 11 million unauthorized immigrants in America a shot at citizenship. But broad reform should also include improvements to employment-based visas and green cards that make it possible to attract and keep highly skilled workers in technology, medical and educational fields, among others.

These individuals and their families often languish in a kind of immigration purgatory for a decade or more as they apply to become permanent residents and, eventually, citizens. Many are effectively required to stay with one employer for fear that they will lose their place in line for a green card. This employment trap can deprive the broader economy of their abilities and allows some companies to pay these workers below-market salaries.

There have been various proposals to improve the system, including measures that would increase the current limit of 85,000 first-time visas under the popular H-1B category used by skilled professionals. (That cap has already been reached for this year.) Others have suggested "stapling" a green card to the degrees of graduate students studying science, technology, engineering and math. And some have pushed for a start-up visa that would help potential entrepreneurs. Here are some sensible changes that should be part of comprehensive reform:

Instead of hard caps for work visas, Congress should use flexible limits that are adjusted based on economic conditions, allowing more immigration when there is a shortage of skilled workers. Policy makers should consider creating an advisory commission, as proposed by the Migration Policy Institute, that would examine the limit every year or two. In the past, lawmakers have raised or lowered the limit on H-1B visas, which stood at 195,000 from 2001 to 2003, in response to lobbying by technology companies or labor groups.

People admitted on work visas should be allowed to change employers after a probationary period of 12 months without losing their place in line for permanent status. This would deal with complaints of discriminatory pay practices. Also, spouses of skilled immigrants should be allowed to work if they choose; it makes no sense to waste their skills by forcing them to stay home.

The per-country limits that restrict immigrants from any one country to 7 percent of the 140,000 employer-sponsored green cards issued annually should be reviewed, and perhaps eliminated. These restrictions, which were first put in place in 1965 to replace racial quotas, create a green card bottleneck for workers from populous countries like India, China and Mexico.

Not every immigrant who comes on a work visa wants to settle here, and some will leave after getting a few years of work experience. But rational immigration policy should make it easier for skilled and hard-working immigrants to stay and contribute to this country.