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STORM THE HILL
ImmigrationWorks USA’s Tamar Jacoby leads business to the forefront of the immigration reform effort.
The immigration debate is snarled between two adamant points of view. Tamar Jacoby’s ImmigrationWorks federation aims to break the deadlock by getting business’s point of view on the table.

By Lisa M. Keefe, editor

The immigration debate revolves around two emotionally charged points of view: Either immigrants are the raw material for the American dream, or they threaten to undermine the very core of our collective identity.

The dichotomy leaves out at least one essential perspective: that of the businesses that employ — indeed, rely on — immigrant labor.

Make that legal immigrant labor.

Business’s need for workers, and its need to operate within the law, creates an opportunity for Tamar Jacoby. Her nonprofit federation, ImmigrationWorks USA in Washington, is an education and advocacy organization for business in the immigration debate.

“I’m a veteran of the immigration reform wars,” says Jacoby, president and CEO. “In 2006 and 2007, what was missing from the debate was a robust business presence saying that they were in favor of the bill.

“If what immigration reform is about is creating a legal way for the workers we need to come into the country, who are the people with the biggest stake in that? Employers have the biggest stake,” she says.

Jacoby created ImmigrationWorks USA a year ago in order to mobilize the sort of grassroots support for immigration reform that proved so effective for its opponents in 2007. It’s the latest venture in a long career focused on immigration and other political issues, including 18 years at the Manhattan Institute.

Jacoby talked with Meetingsplace recently about how business
can advocate for immigration reform, which may appear on President Barack Obama’s agenda as early as this year.

Meatingplace: Describe the situation now for firms that rely on immigrant labor.

JACOBY: The American workforce is growing a lot more slowly. We’re having fewer babies, baby boomers are retiring and we’re getting more and more educated. In 1960, half of all American men dropped out of high school and wanted to do unskilled physical work. That’s not very long ago. Today, less than 10 percent of American men drop out of high school and want to do unskilled physical work.

There are not enough American workers to do the work. We don’t have enough legal foreign workers, and we don’t have adequate tools to tell us which ones are legal and which ones aren’t.

We’re asking for … more visas for legal workers. Supply and demand [brings] about a million and a half workers a year to the United States. We give out a million visas. We can try and make do with 1.5 million … but we need enough visas so that they can all come legally.

Meatingplace: There seems to have been such a pickup in enforcement — does that benefit the organization?

JACOBY: We live in a kind of a nudge-nudge, wink-wink situation. A border patrol agent once said to me, “We pass the laws to keep one side happy, and then we don’t enforce them to keep the other side happy.”

In an ideal world, when we pass a better law, then I want strong enforcement.

Meatingplace: Can you give me a sense of the cultural role of immigration in the United States right now?

JACOBY: That’s why 1960 is interesting. We had almost no immigration between the late ’20s and the late ’60s.

What really affects [immigration] are big global circumstances. What happened in the late ’60s [and] early ’70s were all those big changes I was talking about earlier: fewer babies and … more [education]. Mexico and other countries nearby, their economies started to move away from traditional agriculture into the money economy.

Economic changes and the communication that’s shrinking the globe has made what used to be basically separate labor markets [into] one integrated labor market, and that’s good for the world. That means we can get the workers we need, and they can get the work they need. But the law is lagging behind it.

Meatingplace: What are some of the future trends that you see?

JACOBY: As we start to recover [economically] … I expect the inflow to pick up again. I expect the U.S. labor force to continue to get much more educated, to continue to have fewer babies and continue to retire, so we’re going to continue to need workers.

I think the supply [of Mexican immigrants] is going to start to shrink significantly. In 10 or 15 years the country may be in a situation where we’re desperate to find new sources of immigrants.

Meatingplace: Is immigration perceived the way it was 50 years ago?

JACOBY: You can go back in a time machine to any time in American history, and people always feel emotionally favorable toward the immigrants who came in the past. At the same time they’re always skeptical and anxious about people coming at the moment.

And the more immigrants coming in at any given time, the more anxiety there is.

What’s hard to calculate is what immigrants contribute to economic growth. If you just look at taxes and services you’re pretty much talking either a wash or a deficit. But what those calculations don’t
take into account is what immigrants contribute to economic growth.

Here are [some] numbers from North Carolina: [calculated] costs, because of immigrants — $61 million over 10 years. Now that’s real money. But the growth made possible over 10 years: $11 billion.

Meatingplace: It seems as if we may finally get substantial immigration reform in Obama’s first term. How successful do you think he’ll be?

JACOBY: I think a lot will depend on business. Democrats are not going to be able to do this alone. They’re going to need Republicans and business-friendly centrist Democrats.

Democrats are going to be eager to legalize the people already here, toughen up enforcement, but not necessarily create those new visas I’ve been talking about. If you think about reform, it has three pillars: legalization, enforcement and visas. Democrats are not going to be that eager to put in visas. And from my point of view … it’s like you were trying to come out of Prohibition and decided to legalize all the booze already in the country but not lift import restrictions. All that means is 10 years down the road you’re going to have another big cache of illegal booze floating around in the system — in this case, illegal immigrants. All the more reason that business has to get strong and involved.

Meatingplace: Do you find that your message is well-received?

JACOBY: We’ve been in operation a year. We’re forming coalitions … but we need a lot more muscle than we’ve got. I recently went into a meeting with the chief of staff of a center Democratic member of Congress. There was a stack of papers on the conference table where we were meeting about 10 inches high.

We said, “What’s that? Did somebody from the last meeting leave something here?” And he said, “No. These are the letters we’ve received in the last 30 days against any kind of immigration reform compared to the letters we’ve received in the last 30 days for any immigration reform.” Well, there was only one stack.

[Immigration reform opponents] have been building for 10 years. They have a database of a million people. During the Senate debate last year they sent 2.2 million faxes, and we hardly sent any.

What we’re trying to build is a machine that can deliver a message like that. A lot of those letters were computer-generated. If next to that pile I had a pile that was even an inch tall of real letters from real employers … we don’t have to generate the same kind of numbers. But we can’t be in a situation where we’re not capturing it at all.

We [at ImmigrationWorks USA] have gone from zero [mph] to maybe 30 in the last year, and I’m pleased by that. But we’re not going 65 yet, and the only way we’re going to get there is if more employers get involved. The people who want to be involved but don’t want their brand advertised can get involved behind the scenes. And then people who are willing to have their names out front can get involved in that way. We need more people at all those levels.

I thought in ’06 and ’07 there was a business presence in the fight, but it was all basically inside the Beltway and mostly concentrated on helping the senators write the legislation. It’s not that there’s been no business involvement, it just hasn’t been focused enough on grassroots. When I started to organize I realized that the best way to organize this was going to be state-by-state. I can’t connect people in Texas operating from D.C. Somebody in Texas is going to be able to connect with other people in Texas. The basic size of the unit in our network is a state-based unit. And in a lot of cases we’ve helped them get started.

Meatingplace: What are you advising the companies that you work with do to prepare for immigration reform now?

JACOBY: What I’m saying to them is get involved in your state.

Until we have enough legal workers to fill the jobs we need to keep these businesses open and eventually to grow … it’s going to be problematic. It’s just the worker shortage.

I need companies that are willing to support what we’re doing. I need employers who are willing to … get involved in their states and build a coalition. I need employers who are willing to speak out in the media.

We’re trying to provide a machine for people to plug into and make a difference. But that will only work if [businesses] plug into it.

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