



Opinion: Comprehensive Immigration Reform would bring huge economic benefits

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By Matthew I. Hirsch

As the recent federal budget impasse came to a close, the president made news by announcing that he was prepared to restart efforts to pass comprehensive immigration reform (CIR). Whether this “can and should get done by the end of this year,” as the president said, is uncertain. House leadership has indicated that it will not take up the Senate’s wide-ranging bill during this legislative session and may start next year with a piecemeal strategy that does not provoke the anti-amnesty crowd.

One of the core principles of CIR is legalization of the undocumented. What are the economic benefits of legalizing the undocumented? A UCLA study looked at the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act legalization and found that legalized immigrants earn higher wages, move into higher-paying occupations, invest more in education, open bank accounts, build and buy homes and start businesses. Projecting forward, that study found that CIR would add \$1.5 trillion in U.S. GDP over 10 years. More specifically, the report found that, in the first three years, the higher earning power of legalized workers would yield increased personal income of more than \$30 billion, \$5 billion in new federal taxes and enough new spending to support 750,000 new jobs.

The UCLA study was consistent with an analysis from the Congressional Budget Office, which found that enacting CIR would reduce the federal deficit and “boost the economy.” According to the CBO study, after netting out costs, bringing the undocumented into the workforce would increase the economy by \$700 billion and decrease deficits by \$200 billion over the next decade. The CBO study also concluded that legalization and a temporary worker program would increase the size of the labor force, provide long-term increases in average wages, boost capital investment and raise productivity.

Keeping in mind that reform aims not only at lesser-skilled workers but also at the “best and brightest” — highly educated, high-skilled professionals, scientists, high-tech workers, innovators and entrepreneurs — evidence shows that reforms that both provide a pathway to earned citizenship and open the door for high-skilled and temporary workers would boost economic output, increase state and local tax revenue and create new jobs for Delaware, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

But immigration reform proposals are not limited to legalizing the undocumented. They include provisions that would provide seasonal help for the region’s agricultural economy. To meet labor needs, mushroom farmers, chicken farms and other agricultural producers in the region have historically relied on an immigrant work force of dubious status. Enactment of CIR would obviate the need to hire undocumented workers by providing an improved system for meeting agriculture’s labor needs.

The region also has a large number of world-class universities that attract top students from all over the world. If enacted, CIR would mean that these high-demand college graduates could find employment in our area, instead of taking their high-value degrees in science, technology, engineering and mathematics to other, more welcoming countries.

Our area also has seasonal resorts. The Senate's bill addresses perennial labor shortages in these areas by providing something missing from today's immigration law: the "W" visa for temporary workers. Such a visa would provide a market-tested means of bringing screened, seasonal workers to fill temporary jobs, thereby helping business owners to meet their peak-season needs.

We are also a region that wants to grow its high-tech sector. Immigration reform increases the number of visas for highly educated innovators and entrepreneurs. Despite statistics that show the benefits of attracting foreign high-tech workers and entrepreneurs, today's laws squelch innovation and deter investment from foreign shores. If passed, a new immigration law could stimulate investment and help our region to build out its entrepreneurial infrastructure.

The Senate's CIR proposal also addresses concerns about future flow of undocumented immigrants, criminal aliens and abusive labor practices. It deals harshly with employers who hire the undocumented, increases the number of border agents and immigration judges, provides for enhanced enforcement, detention and removal of aliens involved with gangs, illegal drugs and sexual violence, and cracks down on smugglers.

The time has come for comprehensive immigration reform. The White House is advocating for it. The Senate has managed to pass a bill. And in the Republican-led House, members are crossing the aisle to support CIR. Polls show that the American public supports immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship. But, most important of all for politicians, CIR would offer substantial and demonstrable benefits to the voting public, and just might help them achieve their most prized goal: re-election.

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