

Speakers urge federal leaders to pass immigration reform

By David Little

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WILLMAR — Out-going President Bush, President-elect Obama, the out-going Congress and the new Congress should work together to pass immigration reform and develop programs that will bring new Americans more rapidly into the workforce for companies struggling to find workers, says a spokesman for Minnesota's businesses.

Businesses do not want governors and legislators in various states enacting a patchwork of regulations that create enforcement dilemmas for employers, says Bill Blazar, senior vice president of public affairs and business development for the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce in St. Paul.

"The most important actor is Congress," said Blazar. "Immigration and status of new Americans — documented and undocumented — is a function of federal law."

According to Blazar, employers say differing state-by-state laws would create a worse nightmare for businesses worrying if they are doing something illegal.

His sentiments are echoed by John Keller, executive director and supervising attorney for the Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota, located in St. Paul.

"When states begin to enact immigration policies, employers that have shops (in different) states are caught facing contrasting requirements for hiring employees," said Keller.

He said Minnesota through executive order passed the electronic verify requirement, which requires employers at certain levels to electronically verify every employee. But he said Illinois passed a law that makes employer use of e-verify illegal.

"So if you're an employer who has offices in both states, you're caught in a Catch 22: Do I comply with the law in Minnesota and violate the Illinois law, or do I comply in Illinois? That is happening in part because of the dysfunction in Washington," Keller said.

Keller said the national trend is to increase the difficulty for immigrants to legalize and toward more enforcement, with the federal Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement arresting more undocumented workers, including those at Willmar and more than 1,200 people in one day at six cities including Worthington.

Immigration reform has also failed due to anti-immigration proponents who tend to call their members of Congress.

Blazar and Keller offered their comments during a noon presentation Friday sponsored by the Willmar Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce, Ridgewater College and the Southwest Initiative Foundation and held at the college.

Blazar said Minnesota has a growing immigrant population that is relatively young and has varied educational experience and training. Many workers are concentrated in the food processing industry, as well as other parts of the economy.

While immigrants are 8 percent of the workforce, they're 5 percent of the state's population, up by 130 percent from 1990 to 2000. Minnesota has the 12th fastest growing immigrant population.

As the sector grows, there's plenty of buying power. For Latinos, it was estimated at \$4 billion in 2007, up almost 700 percent since 1990.

The buying power of Asians is about \$5 billion, up 500 percent since 1990. "They account for about 6 percent of retail sales in Minnesota and are 5 percent of the population," said Blazar. "There is some leverage there that should not be ignored or neglected."

An important characteristic of new Americans is the extent to which they work and start businesses. Blazar said Minnesota had almost 4,000 Latino businesses with sales of \$500 million in 2006. Also, he said Asians have almost 8,000 businesses with sales pushing \$2 billion.

"These two populations account for about 8 percent of the business units in the state," said Blazar. "That is a significant contribution to creating, starting and growing Minnesota businesses."

Blazar said his best guess is Minnesota has about 60,000 undocumented workers, who comprise about 1.2 percent of the state's population. He said many people are concerned about the cost that those workers might create for the economy, which he estimated at \$200 million a year.

“That’s an important thing to understand, but when you understand it, you also have to understand the benefits, even though they might be undocumented: they shop, they pay taxes, they pay Social Security tax, which as long as they’re undocumented they will never collect,” he said.

“If you add what they buy, the work they do, and who they work for and the way they contribute to the growth of the economy, our best estimate of their impact on gross state product is close to \$4 billion,” he said.

“This is not an argument that they should be undocumented or we shouldn’t try to solve that problem,” he said. “We absolutely should. It’s just economics: trying to illustrate that, yes, there’s an expense but also a contribution to the economy that we need to keep in mind as we think about development of the workforce.”

Blazer said the country has faced a similar immigration situation. He said the workforce that built the economy at the beginning and throughout the 20th Century was overwhelmingly foreign born.

“It’s something that we’ve done before and we’ve done successfully. The strategy can work to building and developing the state’s economy,” he said.