

Published December 12, 2008 11:40 pm - Businesses are agreeing that an up-and-coming workforce will be needed to grow the economy in the future. That's where immigration steps in.

Businesses: Immigration solution needed
Despite economy, workers need easier access

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MANKATO —

Even with a sour economy pushing jobless rates up, business owners are asking the government for immigration reform that will ensure easier access to workers.

They're also looking to a future when retiring workers will outnumber new ones, requiring either a big boost in productivity or immigrants to grow the economy.

A demographer, business group and lawyer spoke at a forum Friday on the nexus of immigration and the economy.

Davis Family Dairies CEO Mark Davis said immigrant labor is an important part of any free-market economy, and the business community is well positioned to have a role.

"Who better to use than the guys writing the check?" he said.

Aging state, nation

State demographer Tom Gillaspay said Minnesota has prospered not because of an abundance of natural resources or fortuitous geography — it has neither — but because of a world-class workforce.

But long-anticipated demographic changes, especially an aging population, are poised to shape the future economy.

Next spring's high school graduating class, he said, will be the largest class for more than a decade afterward. As the labor pool shrinks, competition will increase and migrating laborers will be more important, Gillaspay said.

Failed federal policy

John Keller, executive director of the Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota, said most legal immigrants arrive in the United States through a family petition. This process takes as little as about a year, and as long as 25 years.

Alternatively, immigrants with in-demand, professional skills can become citizens, but unskilled immigrants almost always can't, even if they're sponsored by an employer who says they can't be replaced. There aren't nearly as many temporary work permits as there are requests from employers.

It's those problems — long waits, and very limited work-related opportunities — that cripple the system.

Federal reform passed the Senate once, in 2006, but didn't pass the House and reach the President's desk. Instead, arrests and deportations have skyrocketed over the past few years.

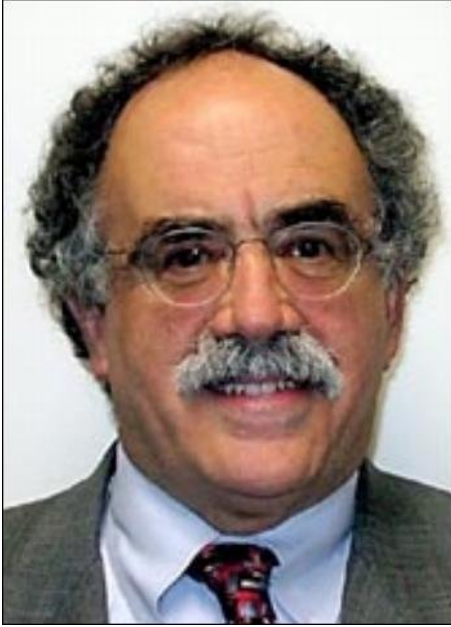
Re-framing debate

The debate about immigration is dominated by the danger posed by illegal immigrants, said Bill Blazar, senior vice president of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce.

But, according to state statistics provided by the chamber, illegal immigrants cost up to \$188 million per year in education, public assistance and incarceration.

What often isn't accounted for is the buying power of immigrants, or the jobs they create as employers.

http://www.mankato-freepress.com/local/local_story_347234009.html?start:int=15



Bill Blazar, Senior VP of the Minn.
Chamber of Commerce



Tom Gillaspay, state demographer