

THI: Immigration not a crisis, it's an opportunity

Op Ed 2014-10-14 16:09:58

Washington, DC - Concern about immigration recently tripled, thanks largely to the surge of unaccompanied minors across the nation's southern border, according to the latest Gallup poll. Yet Congress is hopelessly deadlocked over what to do.

Republican leaders have deferred to the most anti-immigrant members of their caucus — who are effectively calling for mass deportations. Democrats, meanwhile, have refused to even discuss immigration until after this fall's election.

This political gamesmanship must end. Our leaders must welcome the immigrants who have made their way here — not just for humanitarian reasons but for economic ones, too.

Since last October, nearly 60,000 unaccompanied immigrant children have entered the United States from Mexico. Most are fleeing Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador — three nations wracked by unthinkable levels of gang violence and poverty.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, these countries have three of the five highest homicide rates in the world. Honduras has the highest, with 90 murders per 100,000 residents.

Tough luck, say Congressional Republicans. They'd like to ship all these desperate kids back to their native lands. The Republican-controlled House recently passed two bills that would speed deportation of undocumented immigrants and restrict the president's authority to delay deportations.

Not that President Obama has exercised that authority often. He's turned out about two million immigrants and will leave office with the highest deportation tally of any president.

Congress and the president may think their hard line on immigration is addressing the concerns of average Americans, 63 percent of whom believe immigrants place a burden on our economy.

But they're wrong. The United States needs immigrants to fill the significant labor shortage the nation will face.

According to the Stanford Center on Longevity, workers aged 55 or older will account for a quarter of the labor force by the end of this decade. Ten thousand Baby Boomers retire every day.

More than two-thirds of manufacturing executives expect a shortage of skilled production workers in the next three to five years. Roughly 30 percent of hospitals can't find sufficient specialty-service workers. The nationwide shortage of nurses currently exceeds 100,000.

The technology industry is also suffering from a talent shortage. As Microsoft General Counsel Brad Smith recently explained to Congress, "In 2011, it has taken us on average 65 days to fill openings for experienced candidates in core tech positions in the United States." That's one reason the tech giant has opened a 200-employee software center in Canada, where immigration laws make it easier to hire talent from abroad.

The simple truth is there aren't enough young native-born Americans to replace all these retirees — or to fill the many skilled positions that are vacant or soon will be.

The U.S. fertility rate reached a record low in 2013 after falling for six consecutive years, according to the Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention. Fewer births mean fewer native-born workers.

Immigrants can fill that gap. They're more likely to have an advanced degree than native-born Americans. They already make up more than a quarter of physicians, more than 30 percent of computer programmers, and nearly half of all medical scientists in this country.

Further, if given the chance to stay, many of these unaccompanied minors from Central America could grow up to be the doctors, nurses, and engineers the economy is looking for.

Increased immigration doesn't just benefit the foreign-born or companies looking for skilled workers. It also improves the economic prospects of average Americans. Foreign-born workers drove up the average wage of native workers by 0.6 percent between 1990 and 2006 according to London School of Economics professor Gianmarco Ottaviano and University of California-Davis professor Giovanni Peri.

Immigrants are also more likely to start businesses and hire workers than those born in the United States. In the technology and engineering sectors, more than a quarter of the companies launched between 1995 and 2005 had at least one immigrant founder.

Americans will not receive any of these benefits as long as our leaders dither. Lawmakers in Washington must welcome more of the foreign-born — before the supposed immigration "crisis" becomes an economic one.

Gus West is Board Chair and President of The Hispanic Institute (www.thehispanicinstitute.org).

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CONTACT:

By Gus West

Phone: 202 669 6286

www.thehispanicinstitute.org