

Time ripe for reform

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

As many have noted distressingly, the '08 presidential race already has begun. Of the many consequences, count this one as among the most serious: the need to enact immigration reform now.

The majority of Americans recognize the need for broad - and fair - immigration reform.

Standing in the way is the shortened attention span such important issues get once presidential campaigning begins in earnest. Suddenly, what was important gets placed on the back burner.

There exists a promising bill this session, introduced in the House. The bill, authored by Reps. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., and Luis Gutierrez, D-Ill., mimics much of what was good about failed reform efforts in the previous Congress. It provides for tougher enforcement, a system for verifying applicants' legal residency for employers, a "new worker" program tied to visas and earned citizenship measures for both the new workers and those workers, perhaps 12 million strong, who are here already and have been contributing mightily to helping the economy chug along. And who, by the way, will not be going anywhere whether there is reform or not. All the more reason to find a means to include them in meaningful fashion in the U.S. social fabric.

But this bill differs in one significant way - and not necessarily for the better. It requires heads of households to leave the country and re-enter legally to gain a shot at permanent residency for them and their families. "Re-booting" is what some call it. In practice, this will not function unless workers can be assured that the re-entry is not just a ruse to keep them out.

As a starting point for resurrecting immigration reform, Flake-Gutierrez has merit. The same cannot be said of immigration "principles" crafted by the White House and GOP senators, details of which are slowly becoming known. These reportedly do not address a serious backlog issue for those still waiting to enter the country. Simply, this tears families apart. The principles also reportedly do not include a meaningful path to citizenship. This means little incentive to come out of the shadows.

Carlina Tapia-Ruano, president of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, spoke to the Editorial Board on Tuesday and later to the Rotary Club of Milwaukee. She noted a basic fact. The current immigration system is broken. Needed is a system that regulates flow, a system that allows employers to have the workers they need - doing work, in many instances, that Americans won't do - and a system that humanely considers the need for families to be together by eliminating insufferable backlogs. Fences are not the answer.

The Flake-Gutierrez bill, the STRIVE Act, will take the country much closer to that goal. If it is not enacted this year, another chance to solve a problem in need of immediate solution will have been squandered. Again.

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