U.S. Needs Comprehensive Immigration Reform

by Deborah Notkin

The immigration debate is once again dominating the news as members of Congress focus on the long-neglected problem of fixing our country's failed immigration laws.

American lawmakers are now at a critical point. Enforcement-only legislation won't work and hasn't worked. Previous efforts to solve this problem by focusing exclusively on border security have failed miserably.

In fact, during the past decade, the U.S. tripled the number of agents on the border, quintupled the budget, toughened our enforcement strategies and heavily fortified urban entry points.

Yet during the same time period, America saw record levels of illegal immigration, porous borders, a cottage industry created for smugglers and document forgers and tragic deaths in our deserts.

We must learn from our mistakes, not repeat them. What we need is comprehensive, bipartisan immigration reform that deals smartly with the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants living and working in the U.S.

Most are relatives of U.S. citizens and lawful residents or workers holding jobs that Americans do not want. People already here who are not a threat to our security, but who work hard, pay taxes and are learning English, should be allowed to earn permanent residence.

The Secure America and Orderly Immigration Act, introduced by Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., and others, includes the necessary components of reform and provides the basis for fixing our system. It combines toughness with fairness, creating a new temporary visa program that provides a legal flow of workers.

This "break-the-mold" worker program would significantly diminish illegal immigration by creating a legal avenue for people to enter the U.S., something that barely exists today. Current immigration laws supply just 5,000 annual permanent visas and 66,000 temporary visas for essential lesser-skilled workers, in no way meeting the annual demand for 500,000 such workers.

In addition, reducing the decade-long backlog in family-based immigration would reunite families faster and make it unlikely that people would cross the border illegally in order to be with their loved ones.

Congress and the administration must act wisely as they weigh their choices. We've had enough "quick fixes" that have made an already unworkable system worse. We cannot control our borders -; or enhance our national security -; until we enact comprehensive immigration reform.

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