

# LIA among groups pushing for immigration reform

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The [Long Island Association](#), the region's most prominent business organization, is pushing for immigration reform that would give more workers a chance to come to the United States legally.

Key regional industries need workers from overseas to grow and prosper, according to the LIA, which represents thousands of small and large businesses, including manufacturing companies, hospitals and farms.

Joining the heated national debate was an easy decision, said LIA president and chief executive Kevin Law. Overhauling immigration laws is "an economic development issue that goes to the strength of the [Long Island](#) community," he said.

The organization is focusing advocacy efforts on attracting and keeping highly skilled and educated immigrants, permitting more visas for seasonal workers and allowing more foreign-born entrepreneurs to set up shop in the United States.

The association on Feb. 6 sent a letter to the U.S. [House Judiciary Committee](#) -- which held a hearing this month on legalization and enforcement issues -- supporting efforts to revamp immigration laws.

The letter stressed the importance of attracting and keeping immigrants who "help drive the new innovation economy we are building on [Long Island](#)" and the rest of the state.

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The push is part of a multistate alliance of business groups and comes as the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#) and labor groups announced support of immigration reform.

## Work on the East End

Paul Monte, general manager of Gurney's Inn in [Montauk](#), has recruited immigrants from countries such as Ireland, Bolivia and the [Dominican Republic](#). They staff the kitchen, tend gardens and greet customers for a few spring and summer months at the resort and spa.

Many East End businesses offer seasonal jobs that Monte said don't attract local applicants but

present an opportunity for people from other countries.

"It's the best form of American foreign aid we can provide because it provides support for the immigrants, helps people back in their countries and allows American businesses to get the staffing," Monte said.

Caitriona Quinn, of [County Leitrim](#) in Ireland, said she has paid for college with seasonal jobs at Gurney's Inn. "I'd like the opportunity to come back, even if I personally don't see myself moving there full time," Quinn, 25, said in an interview.

Business involvement doesn't make reform more palatable for groups advocating reduced immigration and more enforcement.

"If you listen to the business interests, not just on [Long Island](#) but generally around the country, there are really two types of jobs we have in America -- jobs that Americans won't do and jobs that Americans can't do," said Ira Mehlman, spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a [Washington, D.C.](#), group that opposes comprehensive reform.

"I think that most people just find that absurd," Mehlman said.

Immigrant rights advocates generally welcomed the LIA's involvement.

"That they have come out publicly is very helpful and we need other business leaders and business owners to come out in support of the effort," said Luis Valenzuela, executive director of the [Long Island](#) Immigrant Alliance, an [Amityville](#) umbrella organization for advocacy groups.

The LIA also supports expanded visa and permanent residency programs for immigrants with specialized talents or advanced degrees, particularly in science, technology, engineering and math -- a workforce that could help retain and attract high-tech and research companies, Law said.

The group plans to lobby [Long Island's](#) congressional delegation and [New York](#) Sens. Charles [Schumer](#) and [Kirsten Gillibrand](#). Although the organization is not opposed to legalization for undocumented workers, it will not focus on that issue, Law said.

A bipartisan group of senators that includes Schumer last month released a framework for reform with legalization programs and prioritized visas for industries that rely on immigrant workers. The [Obama](#) administration issued a plan with a similar approach.

### **LI farmers interested**

Immigrant advocates want to ensure workers are not exploited or paid lower wages and have eventual access to a path for citizenship.

David Dyssegaard Kallick, immigration research director at the [Fiscal Policy Institute](#) in Manhattan, said efforts should first address the estimated 11 million to 12 million undocumented immigrants, while creating an orderly immigration system, without flooding business sectors with lower-wage workers.

"We need to balance the business interests with the interests of workers," he said.

A serious push for immigration reform has been long overdue for Long Island's agricultural industry, said Joe Gergela, director of the Long Island [Farm Bureau](#) in [Calverton](#).

Farmers have difficulty attracting nonimmigrant workers for jobs that involve demanding physical work, even for seasonal positions paying \$20 an hour, he said.

Bob [Nolan](#), 50, who owns the 30-acre Deer Run Farms in [Brookhaven](#), said much of his lettuce,

spinach and cabbage would go unpicked without immigrants.

Reform "would be a definite boost to the agricultural industry," Nolan said. "And it would give us some confidence in the future to continue farming."

The Long Island Association's immigration reform effort calls for:

Expanding and streamlining visa programs for foreign entrepreneurs who start businesses and create jobs.

Raising existing entry limits for employment-based visas for immigrants with specialized skills.

Exempting immigrant graduates with advanced degrees, especially in science, technology, engineering and math, from limits for permanent residency cards.

Making it easier for employers to recruit temporary workers for seasonal jobs.

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