

THE BUFFALO NEWS

Another voice / Immigration reform Law should direct families toward upstate cities

By David Dyssegaard Kallick
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Now that the Senate immigration bill seems to be faltering, it's a good time to consider what a better immigration bill would look like. In particular, what kind of immigration reform makes sense for upstate, where the central economic challenges are generating economic growth and revitalizing New York's once-thriving cities?

The Senate bill got one thing right — creating a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. But it needs serious revision on two points: creating a new class of “guest workers,” and restricting family unification.

Immigrants are 5.1 percent of all upstate residents — 5.5 percent in the City of Buffalo — and contribute significantly to the region's economic output and competitive position.

All is not well in the immigrant economy. In some fields, it has become common for unscrupulous employers to pay workers off the books or as “independent contractors” rather than as employees. Strong enforcement of labor laws, paired with bringing undocumented workers into legal status, would improve conditions for all workers.

The Senate bill gives the only pragmatic answer: an earned path to citizenship. Gradually moving undocumented workers into legal status is the best way to bring them out of the shadows and into the light of existing labor law enforcement.

While the Senate got it right on the immigrants who are already here, it was dramatically wrong on what to do about future immigration. The Senate plan introduced a guest worker program that would make matters worse for the next generation of workers. Would guest workers be paid fair wages? Would they be able to join unions? Would employers structure jobs for two-year stints, rather than as long-term jobs with real career ladders?

One of the best ways to help upstate grow would be to revitalize its urban areas — adding population, new businesses, restaurants and entertainment options. In cities around the country, attracting immigrants has been a great way to help fuel urban growth.

Guest workers, however, would effectively be prohibited from starting small businesses. They wouldn't buy homes or raise families here if they were forced to leave every two years.

The proposal replaced family unification with a “point system” aimed at letting in more people with strong educational backgrounds. But restricting families from bringing close family would not help urban revival. What we need is more families putting down roots in upstate cities, not fewer.

Congress needs to get this issue right. It should keep the path to citizenship. Change the guest worker proposal. Restore the priority on family unification. And add to the number of well-educated immigrants who are granted entry as well. That's the immigration reform that would be best for upstate. And it's best for the country, too.

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