



Libertarian Think Tank: Build a Wall Around Welfare

By: Jim Avila – July 24, 2013

While the libertarian Cato Institute admits that immigrants overwhelmingly come to the United States to work and not to go on welfare, to appease right-wing critics of immigration reform it has developed a plan to deny any federal benefits to tax-paying undocumented workers, even after they achieve legal status.

The goal of the report, titled “Building a Wall Around the Welfare State, Instead of the Country,” is to provide a “blueprint” and alleviate what the institute concedes are unfounded concerns by conservatives.

It outlines ways to deny immigrants and the undocumented access to any means-tested welfare programs, such as Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security and food stamps.

“We tried to address the issue about certain use and abuse by noncitizens, no matter how small it is,” Alexander Nowrasteh, policy analyst for Cato and author of the report, said. “It is necessary to convince those skeptics or those who are in the middle — the honest observers of the debate who are trying to come to a decision about the benefits of immigration reform.”

Cato stands by its earlier March report that showed poor immigrants use fewer public benefits than poor citizens and, even though data show immigrants pay into these programs through taxes and use them at lower rates, skeptics remained unconvinced.

“When I talk to people ... about the study that Cato did about welfare use by immigrants before ... the response is ‘Well, any money spent on this is a waste and is a problem,’ and they have a problem when noncitizens use these programs,” Nowrasteh said. “That resonates and convinces people who would otherwise be for immigration reform.”

Nowrasteh adds that they have released “numerous reports over the years” to try and educate people on the issue but concedes that “we also need to show there is a certain amount of welfare use by noncitizens in the U.S.” Cato does acknowledge that immigrants, undocumented or not, pay much more in taxes than they take in government welfare programs.

Nowrasteh said he has spoken with pro-immigrant groups about the recommendation and has received a mix of reactions.

“This is a report that will anger some pro-immigration groups, but I think it’s an important conversation to have if we are trying to convince the majority of Americans that pro-immigration is good for the United States,” he said. “A lot of immigration groups just want to find a pathway to legalize the people here and increase legal immigration moving forward; some groups don’t care at all.”

Julieta Garibay, United We Dream’s legislative affairs associate, does not believe denying benefits is an option for reform.

“If Americans and Congress are honest that they want to fix this issue the right way, we can’t have this second-class citizen,” she said. “That means giving people the rights to use services that they have been contributing to all of these.”