

Portland Press Herald

Dana Connors: Green-card reforms would bring more willing, able workers to Maine

Dana Connors

July 10, 2019

As president of the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, I'm the voice for 5,000 businesses across all regions of our great state. The consensus is that no matter what sector, from health care to forestry to seafood processing, workforce shortages are a major problem. We simply don't have enough available workers to drive growth. Our unemployment rate of 3.3 percent is even lower than the national rate of 3.6 percent. And our current workforce is shrinking as 10,000 baby boomers reach retirement age every day. There's only one solution, and that's to make it easier for immigrants to work in this country long term.

Fortunately, Congress understands this. Both the Senate and the House have introduced bipartisan bills called the Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act, which would eliminate the per-country cap for employment-based green cards. Our own Sen. Susan Collins and Reps. Chellie Pingree and Jared Golden have signed on as co-sponsors in their respective chambers. Currently, only 7 percent of immigrants from any country can apply for a green card each year. Right now, if an employer wants to hire someone from one of the countries that has a higher demand, like India or China, the wait can be decades and up to 151 years, according to the Cato Institute. Eliminating the cap would allow employers to secure the workers they need, no matter where they were born. And the bill could pass as early as this week.

Maine's rich history, vibrant communities and unparalleled work ethic make our state a fabulous place to work and live. And immigrants have long contributed to that legacy, filling jobs in many of our state's most crucial industries. This includes health care, where they care for our elders in nursing homes, and tourism, an industry that supports 107,000 jobs, generates \$2.5 billion in household income and brings in \$600 million in taxes, according to the Maine Office of Tourism. But still, we need more people, especially since the number of deaths in Maine outweighs the number of births annually.

Employers know immigrants arrive here with expertise that doesn't always translate to the jobs that are available. They've told me they're willing to train new Mainers to help them integrate into their workforce. But first we have to get them here. One way to do that is by removing the nonsensical per-country cap. And once immigrants are able to put down permanent roots in Maine, they can make additional contributions to the economy.

Evidence shows that immigrants are also job creators. They found businesses at higher rates than the United States population overall. In Maine, immigrant-owned companies employ 14,031 people and generate \$2.3 billion in sales annually, according to the bipartisan nonprofit New American Economy. But legal immigrants who lack green cards are often not allowed to bring

their entrepreneurial dreams to fruition. With more than 60 percent of our adult population living in rural areas, Maine is especially dependent on small businesses; they employ more than half of our state's workforce. Imagine how many more small businesses Maine's immigrants could start if given the opportunity. Finally, eliminating the per-country cap and allowing more immigrants to start businesses and build professional opportunities within our state would further incentivize people to move here.

The fact is, removing roadblocks to permanent residency for Maine immigrants would help everyone. Our existing immigrant population holds \$741.7 million in spending power to invest into their local communities and pays \$247.8 million in taxes annually, according to New American Economy. Foreign-born Mainers own 8,530 homes in our state and pay local landlords \$73.3 million in rent annually.

There are no limits to what Maine businesses could offer the world, as long as the government doesn't limit our access to a willing and able workforce. Immigrants are key to growing our economy. On behalf of our state's business community, I am asking Congress to pass the Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act. This bipartisan legislation is vital to ensuring a productive and profitable future for all Mainers – and all Americans.