

Intermountain Catholic

Immigrants provide substantial economic benefits

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(Editor's note: This is the most recent in a series dedicated to specific points regarding the immigration debate. Future articles will address in detail the four bills signed into law on Tuesday by Gov. Gary Herbert.)

Recently, the Utah Legislature passed a bill that would provide opportunities for individuals in Nuevo Leon, Mexico to come to Utah and work. Throughout the debate on this and other immigration bills, questions have been raised about the effect of immigrant workers on the United States job market. With unemployment at or near 10 percent across the nation, aren't immigrants, undocumented or otherwise, taking "our" jobs? This is usually followed with concerns that undocumented immigrants don't contribute to the economy through taxes.

The reality is somewhat more complex. A 2009 study for the Immigration Policy Center found that recent immigrants were a smaller percentage of the population in counties with unemployment rates over 13 percent. Counties with the lowest unemployment rates (below 4.8 percent) had a larger population of recent immigrants. The study also noted that the immigrants tend to be employed in industries with fewer job seekers. Thus, there is no evidence to suggest immigrants are taking jobs from other workers.

Undocumented immigrants provide substantial economic benefits. The Social Security Fund receives an estimated \$7 billion from undocumented workers. Those same contributors are ineligible for Social Security benefits, resulting in a net benefit to Social Security and its recipients. Undocumented immigrants also pay sales tax on all purchases and indirect or direct property taxes, depending on whether they rent or own a home. In fact, both the CATO Institute and President's Council of Economic Advisors report that an immigrant pays \$80,000 more in taxes than he or she collects in government services. In short, undocumented immigrants subsidize benefits, such as Social Security, that may only be available to citizens.

Further, history demonstrates that immigration reforms working conditions for all employees. According to a 1992 survey by the U.S. Department of Labor, legalization under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act resulted in a 15 percent increase in wages for legalized workers and an even greater increase for all other U.S. workers. Again, the lawful inclusion of undocumented individuals in the workforce resulted in a net gain for all workers.

In Utah, undocumented immigrant workers are vital participants in our community. The immigrant population has started multiple businesses around the state, for a total of \$227 million in annual sales. The majority of those businesses are in the service sector. Without the undocumented population, many Utahns would lose not only those who care for their yards, homes, and businesses, but also customers who buy the goods and services other local business owners provide. In fact, the Pew Research Center estimated that Utah would lose \$2.3 billion annually without the undocumented population's participation in our economy.

A federal, simplified path to legalized immigration provides benefits for all. Legalization would generate billions more in tax dollars and encourage even greater entrepreneurship. More importantly, it recognizes the human dignity of immigrants and the moral imperative that we treat all people with equal respect. The employment of undocumented workers in violation of the law, for sub-minimal wages and often under horrendous working conditions, must not and cannot be condoned by a civilized nation. As Catholics, we believe all persons have a right to a life with dignity, and therefore a right to migrate when necessary to attain that life.