

Maine needs more workers — no matter where they come from

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July 4, 2019

As the mayor of Lewiston and state representative for House District 60, I continuously hear local employers say they do not have enough skilled workers to maintain and grow their businesses. Our current unemployment rate, 3.2 percent, is even lower than the national unemployment rate of 3.6 percent. On top of that, Baby Boomers are retiring in droves. Unless Congress acts soon, the repercussions of our shrinking workforce will be felt for years to come.

That's why I'm pleased 34 Republican and Democratic senators, including Sen. Susan Collins, have co-sponsored The Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act, which would eliminate the per-country cap for employment-based green cards. The bill could pass the Senate as early as next week, making it much easier for companies in Maine — and nationwide — to secure the talent they need, no matter where the worker was born.

We all know Maine's American-born workforce is aging rapidly. We're the oldest state in the country, one of only two states where deaths outnumber births. If we hope to continue facilitating economic prosperity here, we must build a pipeline of new talent that includes our immigrant neighbors.

The majority of Maine's immigrant population — 72.2 percent — are of prime working age, compared with just 63.1 percent of American-born Mainers, according to the nonprofit New American Economy. Many of these foreign-born residents are eager to put their professional talents to use, but too often roadblocks either limit their opportunities or keep them out of the workforce all together.

Take the Somali man I met recently at Lewiston-Auburn's Adult Education Center. He had been a bakery owner in his native country. But when he first moved to our city and applied for a position at a bakery here, he was rejected because he lacked necessary language skills. In other cases, companies say applicants' skills don't align with their needs. Given our current demographics, employers have to get proactive about their hiring practices. And the government has a responsibility to help them.

Local companies, such as Tyson Foods, are already training new hires for open positions, but not all businesses have those resources. That's why in February I introduced legislation to help fund workforce development training and language acquisition programming to support businesses eager to hire members of our immigrant population. The Maine business community, including

Tyson, MaineHealth, the Lewiston/Auburn Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, Hospitality Maine and Coastal Enterprises, all testified before the Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business that such an initiative would indeed help address worker shortages. The bill was carried over to the next legislative session.

Passing the Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act is another way to remove these hurdles. Currently, only 7 percent of immigrants from any country can apply for a green card each year. It's an arbitrary cap that can result in a wait of decades and up to 151 years for some applicants, according to the Cato Institute. This makes no sense. If we have an overabundance of engineering jobs that need to be filled, and the majority of engineers come from just one or two countries, employers should be able to recruit from the best pool of workers without worrying about where those workers were born.

Passing this bill would also empower immigrants to settle in Maine long term and make permanent investments in our community. The immigrant population in our state already pays \$247.8 million in taxes and holds \$741.7 million in spending power, according to New American Economy. And 8,530 of them are also homeowners. The security that comes with a green card could help boost these numbers.

I believe that government has a role to play in recruiting and training the best talent. This is especially crucial here in Maine, where a significant number of our working-age adults are already employed or nearing retirement. Passing the Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act is vital to ensuring that our state has a prosperous future.