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Giving driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants is right but wrong

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Sometimes a good idea sends a bad message. A prime example is in front of the Florida Legislature.

Two bills have been introduced that would allow undocumented workers to get driver's licenses.

If the thought makes your MAGA-hatted head explode, please take a deep breath.

Florida is home to an estimated 800,000 undocumented immigrants. They are going to drive, and we'd all be safer if they did it the right way.

With its mesmerizing and refreshing acrobatic performances, Cirque du Soleil's Luzia is an international sensation. Featuring a solo traveler on his magical journey, the spellbinding show takes the audience to an imaginary Mexico, where...

By right way, I mean they'd have to pass written and driving tests to prove they know the rules of the road at least as well as someone born and raised in Pahokee.

Studies show that people who drive without licenses are five times more likely to drive drunk and almost 10 times more likely get in a hit-and-run accident.

I'm not sure how having a license makes anyone less likely to drive drunk, but let's try to keep open minds here.

In order to get a driver's license, undocumented workers would have to buy car insurance. That would make them less likely to take off after an accident. Uninsured motorist claims would go down, which would lower premiums for everyone.

Orlando state Rep. Anna Eskamani is co-sponsoring one of the bills. Its supporters say undocumented workers contribute \$573 million to Florida's tax base.

The job market and tax revenue would expand if undocumented immigrants didn't have to take public transit or rely on someone to give them a ride.

Economics and safety aside, there would also be a human benefit. What must it be like to get behind the wheel of a car knowing that getting pulled over for a busted taillight might lead to deportation?

You'd be afraid to go to work or visit the doctor or take your kids to school.

On many levels, letting undocumented immigrants get driver's licenses seems like the right thing to do.

So why does it feel so wrong?

Well, since when is public policy shaped for the convenience of lawbreakers?

I realize we're not supposed to use words like "lawbreaker" when it comes to these members of society. The Associated Press officially recommends describing them as people "living in a country without permission."

The Sentinel prefers "undocumented worker." All of which politely skirts the basic fact they are not supposed to be here in the first place.

As terrible as it must be to sweat out every trip in a car, drivers knew that came with the territory they sneaked into. The fact they're often portrayed as unwitting victims doesn't just chap the MAGA crowd.

About 4 million foreigners respect the law enough to have applied for visas, many in hopes of eventually gaining U.S. citizenship. That would require, among other things, being able to read, write and speak English.

Such requirements are hardly unique. To become a Mexican citizen, you must pass an exam that tests Spanish fluency and knowledge of the country's history, culture and politics.

People waiting in line to get into America see driver's license bills and go, "Que demonios?"

(If you don't know what that means, look it up. It might help you become a Mexican citizen someday).

Undocumented workers bring economic benefits, but supporters rarely discuss the costs of services they receive minus their tax contributions. President Trump put it at \$275 billion a year, but he was on a rant.

A 2017 study by the right-leaning Federation for American Immigrant Reform (FAIR) found undocumented workers cost \$116 billion a year. The libertarian Cato Institute said the cost is between \$3.3 billion and \$15.6 billion annually.

The fact is, nobody knows for sure what undocumented immigrants cost the nation, but it's not \$0.00.

Florida's schools attest to that.

About 265,000 students aren't proficient enough in English for regular classroom instruction. FAIR estimated the annual national cost of English Language Learners (ELL) programs is \$59.2 billion, which seems high.

I wasn't able to get cost information from the Florida Department of Education, and it's impossible to know what percentage of ELL students are from undocumented worker homes.

But again, you can be sure it's not zero.

An estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants live in the U.S. About 90,000 were living in Central Florida, according to a 2016 Pew Research Center study.

They present a polarizing and heartbreaking problem politicians have failed miserably to address. But it is a problem, and it's hard to see how incentivizing more people to come is going to lessen it.

“Hey, not only can I sneak into America and get a job. They’ll gladly let me drive to it!”

As wrong as that seems, the rationale behind it can’t be denied.

So what should the Legislature do?

My suggestion would be to give driver’s licenses to undocumented workers, with only one condition.

The first drive they take is back to their country of origin, where they get in line to become documented workers.