

ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

Alaska doesn't have a border problem

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In the recent commentary "[Alaska's new border problem](#)" that appeared in the ADN Aug. 16, the author offered a misguided assertion that "employers — until now forbidden to hire low-cost illegal immigrants — might well turn to the newly legalized workers at the expense of Americans." The writer likely was referring to the proposed U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021. The act seeks to provide a citizenship pathway for undocumented immigrants. This piece, asserting that newly legalized immigrants will take jobs American workers need, was misinformed.

The Act was referred to the Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship in April. No action has been taken on it since. There is no impending "border problem." After the Act passes, there will still be no "border problem."

COVID-19 significantly impacted Alaska's job market. Thousands of Alaska residents are unemployed — about 23,000, according to [a report](#) in June of 2021 by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. I don't dispute that people are living off unemployment benefits and stimulus checks. I dispute the assertion that "newly legal immigrants" will take "jobs American workers need."

Industries "crippled by COVID-19" are posting jobs. We are far from complete economic recovery. There are fewer jobs available and job offerings may be configured differently, but [jobs are open](#).

A cursory check of [Indeed.com](#) lists more than 12,000 jobs in Alaska, including openings for laborers, fishing, North Slope workers, cooks, doctors, nurse practitioners, construction, housekeepers, tourism, caregivers, security, retail, IT, work-from-home and hospitality. Spend a day shopping in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Homer or Seward, and you'll see "help wanted" signs everywhere. Waiting in line to be served, seated or assisted?

In the immediate context of COVID-19 and unemployment, here's a few reasons why Alaskans are unemployed, collecting benefits, and may not be actively looking:

1. Lack of available child care providers. Child care was already expensive, and now there are fewer providers. Women are bearing the brunt of this, and many are unable to go back to work even if they want to.
2. Fear of the workplace environment. People are concerned about contracting COVID-19 or being abused/assaulted (servers are being spit on, flight attendants are physically injured and passengers are acting inappropriately, a problem instigated by at least one Alaska legislator).

There are people that don't want to return to their previous jobs because the wages are too low for the work they were doing. There are employers who can't yet afford to bring back their former employees. There are people for whom unemployment and stimulus checks supply more income than working for regular wages. There are people that feel the available work is too disagreeable for them.

Employers, take note and review wage offerings. It's time to increase wages, include a benefit package, and pass the cost to the consumer. Subsidizing the cost of my hamburger or oil change shouldn't come at the expense of the employee. This is particularly true for the 10% of the Alaska population who, as the writer imparted, "live under the poverty line who work in industries crippled by COVID-19." Employers, do your part: Pay a living wage.

Regarding the concern for competition from newly legalized immigrants with the "lower-skilled Alaskans" who "work in tourism and fishing." Tourism and fishing jobs are available today and have been, year after year, over the course of my 40-year participation in the Alaska job market.

The job I disliked the most was in a hotel laundry, and I quit before the month was out. My quitting that job reflects an issue that is both supported by research and reported by some employers.

Scientific American reported in 2018 that "Native-born Americans are not avoiding work on farms and landscaping companies because the pay is too low — they're avoiding work they find undesirable. The work is hard: It may mean working in extreme heat or cold, requiring physical labor that takes a toll on a human body."

Citing firsthand accounts from business owners, the article details the difficulty these businesspeople had in trying to hire native-born Americans. Despite offering \$20 per hour, 401K accounts, and other perks, jobs went unfilled or native-born American new hires quit after a day or two, or even after lunch on the first day. The National Academy of Sciences found a similar result: Immigrants appear to be working in low-skilled jobs that native-born Americans are either not available for or unwilling to take. To help fill their job needs, American businesspeople lean heavily on various visa programs, but even those have been restricted.

Regarding the claim that more people competing for the same job lowers wages, other research shows this isn't the case. A Cato Institute report (and others) described how increased immigration resulted in higher wages.

The same article detailed a Pew Research study that demonstrates that immigrants — both legal and unauthorized — don't necessarily compete for the same jobs as native-born Americans. The study suggests immigrants work in different jobs due to educational differences, language skills, age, and technical skills.

There are no "newly legal immigrants" coming to take away jobs. There are jobs available today. When the U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021 passes, jobs will still be available.