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When solution is the problem

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THE United States has virtually and physically reopened interstate travel and removed restrictive quarantine rules with an eye on the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays and the expected crowded airports, railroads and roads.

A multistate campaign has been established to "monitor the state and local government response to the coronavirus — <https://www.multistate.us/issues/covid-19-state-reopening-guide> — "MultiState."

"MultiState" created a Covid-19 State and Local Policy Dashboard in early March that provides a quick and easy reference to updates and information issued by state and key local agencies to focus on reopening the economy.

The "Great Resignation" phenomenon in the US continues.

On October 18, the Washington Post said a "record 4.3 million US workers quit their jobs in August "based on a US labor department report — "a figure that expands to 20 million if measured back to April."

"Many of these resignations took place in the retail and hospitality sectors, with employees opting out of difficult, low-wage jobs. But the quitting spans a broad spectrum of the American workforce, as the toll of the pandemic — and the tortuous path to recovery — keeps fueling what Atlantic writer Derek Thompson has described as "a centrifugal moment in American economic history."

This US problem could be solved by allowing legal immigrants back — and fast.

The solution, however, is bogged down in its own problem.

Problem No. 1: As of this month, the US State Department reports that there are 461,125 immigrant visa applicants waiting for their interview notices at consular posts/embassies worldwide. This is the remainder of the 490,089 applicants who were ready for visa appointment scheduling after 28,964 were issued interview notices.

Solution: Embassies should resume normal visa processing, interview visa applicants and issue visas to those who are qualified.

Problem No. 2: Embassies worldwide are not operating normally with orders to "resume routine visa services expeditiously but only in a safe manner even as the pandemic continues to severely impact the number of visas our embassies and consulates abroad are able to process.

Solution: Lifting of quarantine protocols by the Philippine government allow almost unrestricted mobility of people in areas under alert levels from 1 to 3. By doing so, the Philippines stands to gain P3.6 billion more and generate 16,000 jobs per week in the National Capital Region (NCR) alone if the alert level is lowered from 2 to 1, Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Karl Chua said in an October 28 Rappler report.

NCR has been on Alert Level 2 since November 5.

The independent research group tracking the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) situation in the country believes the NCR or Metro Manila could shift to the most lenient Alert Level 1 beginning December.

Problem No. 3: The US Embassy in Manila does not have a running tally of how many visa applicants have been scheduled in coordination with the National Visa Center (NVC). NVC relies on the embassies to inform them of the Manila post's capacity and staffing capability.

Solution: More staff should be allowed to return to work to support consular services and interviews. However, the alert levels in NCR/Metro Manila and provinces are not in sync.

Problem No. 4: Visa operations at the US Embassy in Manila remains tentative as the consular post can only offer "limited routine visa services because of the Covid-19 pandemic."

Solution: Lower the status of pandemic into an endemic, i.e., live with the Covid-19 virus instead of going for a zero-Covid-19 state. Vaccination rates and herd immunity are the key elements.

Problem No. 5: As of Nov. 11, 2021, only around 30.8 million people have been fully vaccinated from the Covid-19 virus in the Philippines. In contrast, roughly 36.9 million people were still waiting for their second dose of the vaccine (Department of Health data). Covid-19 vaccination

in the Philippines started only in March 2021, aiming to vaccinate 58 million people by the end of the year.

Solution: Increase the rate of vaccination with available vaccines to those in need based on priorities.

Problem No. 6: Approved Covid-19 vaccines are not available to specific recipients. The government announced that it was in advanced stages of negotiations with various vaccine manufacturers and expected the first vaccine supply to arrive in the first quarter of 2021. We are now in the last quarter.

The government received the 2 million Pfizer vaccines from the US government only on September 20, part of the 10 million doses, which were co-procured by the US government with the Covax Facility.

Health Secretary Francisco T. Duque 3rd said "the government is recalibrating its strategies in addressing the rising Covid-19 cases to a more targeted scheme (and) the local government units must also ramp up their Covid-19 vaccination, especially to the elderly population who are most at risk for severe Covid-19 and even dying from it."

In short, despite the NCR moving toward Alert Level 1, visa applicants from outside Metro Manila and the NCR will find it difficult to get to the embassy assuming the consular post resumes normal visa processing.

So, we go back to Problem No. 2, which keeps Problem No. 1 from resolution.

Long-term solution: Increase the number of visas available

The backlog is a function of the annual visa limits mainly for the family-based preference categories. If there were more visas available — and issued — the waiting list would disappear.

In a recent column, we showed the allocation worldwide for applicants in the family-based categories:

Each country has a 25,620 annual quota. The spouse, minor children and parents of US citizens are not subject to the numerical limits. However, they are given preference and interviewed ahead of those in the limited family-based visa applicants.

The CATO institute reported that for Fiscal Year 2021 (Oct. 1, 2020 to Sept. 30, 2021), there were 2,208,857 unused immigrant visas from the family, employment-based; recaptured employment-based visas; diversity and refugee visa allocations: family-sponsored, 561,454;

employment-based, 582,275; BB recapture, 490,964; diversity visas, 150,759; and refugees, 423,415.

There are pending bills seeking to recapture and allocate these unused visas, which had accumulated since 1992.

1. HR1177 from the House of Representatives and S348 from the Senate — US Citizenship Act: The US Citizenship Act actively being pushed by President Joe Biden that "would recapture 1.6 million unused family, employment and employment recapture green cards from 1992 to 2021. If these visas were unused at the end of the fiscal year in which they were recaptured, they would pass from family to employment and back year after year until they were all used. By including all "employment-based" green cards, it includes the number of unused "recaptured" employment-based numbers that were previously recaptured, but then not used immediately. But the bill would not recapture any lost diversity or refugee numbers."

That would not only increase and facilitate visa interviews but would make all the Family-preference categories for the Philippines in the "Current" column.

2. The House Budget Act (Reconciliation Bill): As passed by the House Judiciary Committee in September this "narrower recapture provision" resurrects between about 221,000 and 911,000 green cards — still a substantial number enough to move priority dates forward and interview notices issued.

The House of Representatives passed President Biden's ambitious \$1.75-trillion social policy and climate bill last week (November 19). It now moves to the Senate where a 50-50 vote is the logical outcome with Vice President Kamala Harris deciding.

The \$2.2-trillion spending bill is the core of President Biden's domestic agenda aimed at battling climate change, expanding health care and reweaving the nation's social safety net for the next decade. Republicans are expected to unanimously oppose the bill including filibustering.

Meanwhile, for the tens of thousands waiting for their immigrant visa interviews at the US Embassy in Manila, observing quarantine protocols and safety measures is highly recommended as it will help solve Problem No. 4.