



Bill would create 500,000 new visas, include path to citizenship, and be open to current aliens

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A bill introduced this month by Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) would increase foreign guest workers by up to 500,000 a year and offer a back-door amnesty for illegal immigrants.

The legislation, the State Sponsored Visa Pilot Program Act of 2017, has attracted support from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the libertarian-oriented Cato Institute.

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The bill would represent a massive increase in the number of non-immigrant visas issued each year by the United States. Unlike the myriad of existing visa programs, Johnson’s proposed program would be a state-based system.

Each state and the District of Columbia would be able to sponsor 5,000 visas each year. Another 245,000 visas would be distributed to the states based on their populations. Visas not used by one state could be claimed by others.

The visas would be good for three years and could be renewed indefinitely.

The federal government would retain responsibility for conducting background checks and issuing the visas. But each state would determine the rules governing the visa holders, such as whether to restrict them to certain industries or employment categories, whether to impose income requirements, or whether to require employers to make a good-faith effort to hire Americans first.

“We pretty strongly oppose it,” said Chris Chmielenski, director of content and activism at NumbersUSA. “It’s an indefinite renewable visa. In our eyes, that’s a permanent worker.”

Perhaps more significantly, Johnson’s bill would allow states to sponsor illegal immigrants for visas as long as they came prior to this year and had not been convicted of a felony, violent crime, or drunken-driving offense.

“It seems like a way to turn illegal aliens into guest workers,” said Ira Mehlman, a spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform.

Once they gained guest-worker status, the formerly illegal immigrants — like those who applied from foreign countries for visas — could get in the regular line for green cards and permanent residency.

“This is just wrong on so many levels,” Mehlman said. “It shines a spotlight on the utter failure of our overall immigration policy.”

Mehlman said immigration long has been understood to be a federal responsibility. Farming that out to 50 states and the District of Columbia would undermine that concept and invite abuse, he said.

What’s more, he said, it could put further pressure on vulnerable Americans.

"There's no evidence to suggest that we have labor shortages in most areas of the country," he said. "If we did, we'd have wage inflation."

Chmielenski said it is hard to assess the bill's prospects.

"There's some interest in it in the Senate," he said. "It could be a springboard to something else."

John Miano, a labor lawyer and fellow at the Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies, said Johnson's bill represents the latest attempt by politicians to solve a problem they created.

"The functional paradox of fixing the immigration system is that it's done by the same people who broke it in the first place," he said. "This is just nuts."