



Beto O'Rourke pitches Texas guest worker program - how would that work?

Will DuPree

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AUSTIN (KXAN) — Questions about immigration kicked off Friday night's debate between the top two candidates for Texas governor, and Democrat Beto O'Rourke pitched a policy that no other state has adopted as a fix for the economy and immigration.

O'Rourke said he would like the state to set up its own guest worker program, something immigration experts said only the federal government has the authority to do now. He shared no specifics about what it would take to launch a new bureaucratic effort to essentially offer temporary visas to foreign workers.

"I'm going to work with local leaders, Republicans and Democrats alike, to make sure that we have a Texas-based guest worker program," O'Rourke said Friday, "to alleviate shortages that we have in our state for labor demands and reduce inflation and address supply chain issues as

His campaign website's immigration policy page states a guest worker program for Texas "provides a legal way for migrants to fill labor shortages in key Texas industries like agriculture, oil and gas, and manufacturing."

In response to what O'Rourke proposed, Gov. Greg Abbott said creating that kind of program would fall outside the scope of Texas governor.

"[O'Rourke] talked about this guest worker program," Abbott said during the debate. "He could have done that had he won the race for the Senate or won the race for president. That's not a job for governor. The job of governor is have to deal with the chaos caused by the Biden administration and his open border policies that Beto would replicate."

Any Austin businesses that bring on foreign workers here on temporary visas works with the federal government to secure those. Statistics shared in 2020 by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security showed that the federal government issued more 510,343 visas for agricultural workers and 368,440 more for temporary workers in specialty occupations, like tech programmers.

Letting Texas issue its own temporary visas to foreign workers would be possible, but only if Washington acts first. Néstor Rodríguez, an immigration professor at the University of Texas at Austin, said that doesn't seem likely given the gridlock in D.C.

"It's an interesting idea, an innovative thought," Rodríguez said, "but you can imagine that a new law would have to go through Congress. That's going to be a major obstacle right now given the attitudes about immigration."

The idea O'Rourke put forward Friday touches on a policy proposal brought forward five years ago by two conservative federal lawmakers. Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wisconsin, and Rep. Ken Buck, R-Colorado, introduced a bill in 2017 that would have created a state-based visa pilot program. The legislation would have allowed states to start their own guest worker programs, so they could meet "their individual workforce needs," according to a news release from that time. The legislation ultimately did not move forward, but Johnson explained in a statement why he supported it.

"We have a shortage of workers in all different areas of the economy," Johnson's 2017 statement read. "We need to recognize that a one-size-fits-all federal model for visas or guest workers doesn't work. Let the states manage the visas, allocate them to the industries that need the workers, set prevailing wage rates."

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, actually agrees with O'Rourke's stance that states could better handle the responsibility of issuing foreign worker visas.

"We've had the same basic immigration structures since 1990," David Bier, the Cato Institute's associate director of immigration studies, said. "If the states had been allowed to adopt different policies, make changes, increase caps, change the focus of which industries need workers, we could have had a lot of problems solved at the local and state level rather than have them build up to a national crisis."