



Upstate immigrants hope for legal status; critics fear political motives

By: Ron Barnett- June 29, 2013

Samuel Castro's story is typical.

He left Honduras with his wife in 2010 and spent two years in Miami on a work visa. His goal was to make money to send back to his parents and three sisters who are surviving on a fraction of the money he can make in the United States.

His visa expired in March 2012, but he couldn't face returning home.

"In Honduras everybody has problems," the 24-year-old told GreenvilleOnline.com. "Money. All the country have problems. You can't stay in your house safe because somebody come in and get your money. Crime, everything. It's very difficult. So it's better here."

So he moved to the Upstate and got a job as a stocker in a Hispanic grocery store.

"I don't have problems here," he said during a break from filling shelves with Spanish-labeled canned goods. "I don't drink, I don't drugs. So I don't have problems with this country, with the people."

"I need to work, work, work to send money, help."

He's one of the estimated 11 million immigrants living in the United States without legal permission, about 40 percent of whom federal officials say came here legally but overstayed their visas.

As Congress debates immigration reform this summer, the issue of what to do about the illegal residents living among us has risen to the forefront of the nation's social and political debate.

South Carolina, while ranking 34th among the states in percentage of Hispanic population at 5 percent according to the 2010 Census, has an outsized voice in the outcome of the debate, with two of the state's GOP congressmen, Sen. Lindsey Graham and Rep. Trey Gowdy, playing key roles in pushing competing immigration reform bills.

Graham, a member of the so-called Gang of Eight, is one of the sponsors of a bipartisan measure that passed the Senate this past week. It would open the way for illegal immigrants to become U.S. citizens eventually, while strengthening border security.

Gowdy, chairman of the House's Border Security Subcommittee, has introduced a bill that would authorize local law enforcement officers to enforce immigration laws. It's one of several

bills emerging from the House that aim to address immigration one piece at a time, rather than in a comprehensive bill such as Graham's.

The debate comes at a time when attitudes toward immigration reform are shifting in the Palmetto state.

A poll released earlier this month showed 62 percent of South Carolina voters are in favor of the Gang of Eight legislation.

The poll, sponsored by the Alliance for Citizenship, Partnership for a New American Economy and Republicans for Immigration Reform, showed that 70 percent support "a tough but fair path to citizenship" and 87 percent said it is important "that the U.S. fix its immigration system this year."

Also, change is being pushed by a variety of religious coalitions, ranging from evangelical to Catholic.

Political consequences

Graham, while taking heat from many within his own party, notes that there are political reasons for Republicans to act on immigration, and not just because of shifting opinions among the electorate.

The Republican Party's support among Hispanics fell from 44 percent to 27 percent between 2008 and 2012, he says.

"I'm convinced it's the rhetoric around the immigration debate in 2006 and '07 that's hurt our party," he said during a recent visit to Greenville. "If our party is seen yet again killing immigration, it's going to be very difficult for us to grow as a party."

He said Hispanics would be a natural fit for the GOP, if the party can put forward a good solution on the immigration issue.

"Hispanics are pro-life, hard-working, entrepreneurial, very patriotic, join the military in large numbers," he said. "There's no reason in the world Republicans cannot do well with Hispanics, given the marriage of ideas.

"The problem is nobody listens to you about creating jobs or national security if they think you're going to deport their grandmother. We have to get this behind us."

Of his critics within the conservative ranks, Graham said, "The people who don't like me because of immigration I've long since lost."

One of those is Don Rogers, a leader of the Greenville Tea Party.

Speaking only for himself and not the group, Rogers painted a bleak picture of the future if Graham's bill becomes law.

The whole motivation behind President Obama's push to reform immigration laws, Rogers believes, is to cash in on a future Democratic voting bloc that will create an insurmountable obstacle for Republicans to ever attain the White House or control of Congress.

"If this immigration bill actually passes anywhere close to where it is now, it will be a huge disaster to this country that cannot be fixed," he said.

The bill's provision that would make illegal immigrants wait at least 13 years to be able to apply for citizenship "is absolute, total fiction," Rogers believes. "It will dissipate like the morning dew."

He argues that South Carolina should nullify such an immigration law if it were to pass.

But he believes the country needs a guest worker program because of the need for immigrant farm labor.

Economic necessity

The latter is a point Greenville Mayor Knox White makes as well.

White, in his day job, is an immigration lawyer. Although he works mostly with more highly skilled clients coming here to work for international companies such as BMW, he also has a view of the issues facing low-skill immigrant workers.

If Congress had included a temporary worker program, broader than the visa program now available on a limited basis for agricultural workers, the last time it adopted comprehensive immigration reform in 1986, it would have prevented much of the problem the country now faces, he believes.

Many of those workers who have overstayed their visas would have gone back home when the time came if they had been able to go back and forth when they needed to, White believes. Instead, the visa process is much too complex to allow that, and workers who overstay won't be able to get back in legally if they went home, he said.

"If you're here illegally for over five years you're barred from coming back," he said. "If you didn't enter legally to start with, you were blocked from ever applying through the normal process."

How many of the 11 million illegal immigrants here now would become citizens if they had that pathway opened? "Far fewer than people think," White said. One reason is the cost — up to \$4,000.

"I think there will be many who will be happy with permanent residence," White said.

Too much emphasis has been put on border security rather than solving the underlying causes of illegal immigration, he believes.

“When I look at all the debate about the border, building fences and all that, I still think there’s only so much good that can do,” he said. “The more effective weapon against illegal immigration would be having a normal guest worker program, number one, and number two, E-verify.”

Billy Ledford, owner of Beechwood Farms, a fruit and vegetable grower in northern Greenville County, sees it a little differently.

From the perspective of an employer who relies on immigrant workers, it’s not his fault if people have crossed the border illegally and come looking for work.

“My claim is the criminal out there is the federal government (that’s) been letting it happen to me,” he said.

He has had to turn away prospective workers who didn’t pass E-verify, and it hurts him to do it, he says.

“It’s sad when somebody comes our way and wants to work but can’t,” he says.

Ledford relies on immigrants because American citizens rarely last longer than a day or two in the fields picking tomatoes and squash and cucumbers in the hot sun on his 150 acres, he says.

Most of his immigrant workers live in Greenville County year-round, although he needs a full staff of 20-30 only during the summer. The rest of the year, they work jobs such as landscaping and housekeeping, he said.

They’re hard workers and they do a job well that nobody in the local labor pool is willing to do, he says.

If he wanted to expand his operation, he would face “a shocking difficulty” in finding laborers, he believes.

He chats and jokes with some of the immigrant workers during a break in a late afternoon session at the loading dock. Crates of freshly picked bright yellow squash are piled high, ready for shipment to local markets. A group of Hispanic children run past, laughing.

Asked if they mind GreenvilleOnline.com videoing them while they work, a group of workers talk it over in Spanish briefly and decide it’s OK. But no one wants to be interviewed.

“I know the hearts and minds of workers,” Ledford says. “They mean well. They don’t mean harm to no man. They don’t mean to hurt nobody. They don’t mean to steal, be vindictive to nobody. They’re human beings first.”

Farmers across the state and nation face a tight labor market and rely on immigrant workers, according to David Winkles, president of the South Carolina Farm Bureau.

He’s one of 20 co-signers of a letter to Graham and Sen. Tim Scott expressing support for the Senate bill.

Other signers include the Home Builders Association of South Carolina, the Palmetto AgriBusiness Council, the South Carolina Restaurant and Lodging Association and individuals including former U.S. Rep. Gresham Barrett and former Ambassador to Canada and Speaker of the state House of Representatives David Wilkins.

“The agriculture sector needs some stability in the arena of an immigrant work force,” Winkles said. “We have a horrible time. We have a scarcity of workers who are seeking jobs at the basic level that we need to pick fruits and vegetables.

“So this bill, we’re hoping will add stability to that.”

Employers, including farmers, haven’t been allowed to question the documents that prospective workers present to them in trying to get hired, until the E-verify program went into effect in South Carolina in January 2012.

Nationwide expansion of E-verify, an Internet based program that is able to determine whether an applicant’s documents are authentic, is part of the Senate bill.

“We want a workable program so our farmers can hire legal workers,” Winkles said.

South Carolina’s two largest industries — tourism and agriculture — are heavily dependent on immigrant labor, as is the construction business, which prompted the formation of the Palmetto State Coalition for Immigration Reform, said spokesman Shell Suber.

Economic impact

Although it’s clear that much of the food we eat is harvested or processed by Hispanic immigrants, their overall economic impact is less clear.

For starters, it’s not known exactly how many are here, or how many are here illegally.

But a 2012 study by the Cato Institute, a think tank dedicated to the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets and peace, says, “The typical immigrant and his or her descendants pay more in taxes than they consume in government services in terms of net present value.

“Low skilled immigrants do impose a net cost on government, in particular on the state and local level, but those costs are often exaggerated by critics of immigration and are offset by broader benefits to the overall economy.”

The report cites a 1997 National Research Council study that determined that “the typical immigrant and descendants represent an \$80,000 fiscal gain to the government in terms of net present value.”

David Hughes, a Clemson University professor of rural development and an Extension Service economist, did a study of the economic impact of Hispanics in three counties in the Charleston area in 2008.

He found that they spent \$194.3 million, which generated a ripple impact of more than \$500 million.

Immigrants' costs to taxpayers are equally difficult to calculate on the other side of the balance sheet.

Their levels of health insurance coverage is around 50 percent — much lower than for whites and blacks, Hughes said.

Greenville Health System doesn't track undocumented patients, so it would be impossible to determine the number of illegal immigrants GHS treats each year or estimate the cost, spokeswoman Sandy Dees said.

The public schools also can't ask for proof of citizenship before enrolling children, according to Greenville County School District spokesman Oby Lyles.

As of the most recent count, March 25, the district had 8,768 Hispanic students, not counting charter school students, according to district documents. How many may be illegal or were born here to parents who came here illegally isn't known.

South Carolina had 51,958 Hispanic public school students — 7 percent of the total — in the most recent statewide count, last November, according to state Department of Education records.

The cost of educating them would be offset by sales tax dollars generated when they spend money on taxable items, which generates the bulk of education funding. Those who own homes would pay property tax as well, and those who rent pay it indirectly through their rent on homes, which are taxed at a higher rate than owner-occupied homes.

In order to receive benefits such as food stamps or welfare, applicants must prove citizenship, according to state Department of Social Services spokeswoman Marilyn Matheus. The agency uses the Systematic Alien Verification and Evaluation system to determine citizenship, she said.

Many of them would be eligible if they became citizens, if they stayed at the same income level.

The median annual personal earnings of Hispanics in South Carolina is \$18,000, compared with \$30,000 for non-Hispanic whites, and \$20,000 for blacks, according to U.S. Census figures from 2010.

Among Hispanics 17 and younger in South Carolina, 44 percent live in poverty, compared with 15 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 41 percent of blacks.

A Congressional Budget Office analysis of the Senate bill fueled debates on both sides of the issue leading up to Thursday's vote.

It estimated that legalizing the nation's unauthorized immigrants would reduce the federal deficit by \$197 billion within a decade and another \$700 billion the following decade.

The CBO report said the government would spend about \$262 billion in a decade, mostly in tax credits and health care payments through Medicaid and Obamacare because of the bill, if it became law. But that would be more than offset by \$459 billion in income and payroll taxes paid by legalized immigrants, it says.

Alabama Republican Jeff Sessions, however, cited a report from the conservative Heritage Foundation that says the government would end up paying immigrants about three times as much in benefits and services as they pay in taxes if the bill becomes law.

“The wages of U.S. workers — which should be growing — will instead decline,” he said in a statement released by his office. “This bill guarantees three things: amnesty, increased welfare costs, and lower wages for the U.S. workforce. It would be the biggest setback for poor and middle-class Americans of any legislation Congress has considered in decades.”

The Gowdy approach

Gowdy, who represents most of Greenville and Spartanburg counties in Congress, stopped short of criticizing Graham. But he doesn't think the bill he helped write is going anywhere.

“I don't think the Senate bill is going to be voted on in the House,” Gowdy told GreenvilleOnline.com.

He's working with other House members to push immigration reform one plank at a time, starting with his bill, the Strengthen and Fortify Enforcement Act (SAFE), which has passed in the Judiciary Committee.

The key feature of his bill is giving state and local law enforcement agencies the authority not only to assist federal officials in enforcing federal immigration laws but also opening the door for state and local government to adopt their own immigration laws, and attack illegal immigration directly.

“If Greenville County wanted to have, or if the state of South Carolina wanted to have, a set of immigration laws that are consistent entirely with federal immigration laws, what's the reason not to let them?” he said.

His bill would make those who overstay their visa guilty of a federal misdemeanor. It's already against the law to cross the border without U.S. government permission, but it's not illegal to remain in the country after your visa expires, Gowdy said.

His bill would provide grants to local and state law enforcement and increase the amount of space used to detain illegal immigrants. It would add 2,500 detention enforcement officers at Immigration and Customs Enforcement as well as 60 ICE attorneys, 5,000 deportation officers, and 700 support staff.

The bill's cost has not yet been estimated.

But Gowdy said he's not calling for local law enforcement officers to try to arrest every illegal immigrant in the country.

“No one that I have heard during this debate is advocating for the arrest and deportation of 11 million people,” he said. “Now, what we do advocate for is the arrest and deportation of those undocumented immigrants who have committed other offenses. Even the Democrats support that.”

But police would have the authority to arrest anyone violating a state or local immigration law, if one were to be passed, he said.

Bob Taylor, chairman of Greenville County Council, said he hasn’t given any thought to passing a county ordinance against illegal immigration, but he said he has confidence in Gowdy’s efforts.

“I haven’t heard, really, a lot of complaints, especially lately, about the situation,” he said. “I’m sure there are illegals here. If somebody has evidence that somebody is illegal, any law enforcement officer ought to be able to arrest them.”

Greenville Police Chief Terri Wilfong said she’s concerned that Gowdy’s legislation could overburden the department.

It talks about grants provided for technology and equipment for investigations but never mentions the cost of manpower, she says. “The main concern is it will be taxing for our agency with additional responsibilities to our current manpower allocation.”

Faith community involvement

Beyond the law enforcement aspect of the issue is the moral dimension, an area that has energized segments of the faith community.

The bishop of South Carolina’s Catholic diocese, the Most Rev. Robert Guglielmone, sent a letter to all the state’s Catholic churches that he asked be read at mass, telling parishioners that he is urging Congress to “enact effective immigration reform that provides a fair pathway to citizenship and keeps families together.”

He noted that the majority of the Hispanic immigrants are of the Catholic faith.

“I do not advocate an easy path to documentation — I support appropriate and fair requirements for citizenship — but I feel very strongly that this immigration issue must be rectified,” he wrote. “Congress must act now.”

A group called the Evangelical Immigration Table is leading a Twitter campaign called #pray4reform that has drawn support from major leaders such as Richard Land, who was president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission until earlier this month.

That group is calling for reform that establishes a path toward legal status or citizenship for those who qualify and want to become permanent residents as well as ensuring fairness to taxpayers, protecting the unity of families and respecting “the God-given dignity of every person.”

The Southern Baptist Convention, at its annual meeting in Houston this month, didn't pass any resolutions on immigration but discussed the Evangelical Immigration Table position, according to the Rev. Frank Page, former pastor of Taylors First Baptist and now president and chief executive officer of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee.

He said he's "basically in agreement" with the Senate bill.

"I do not call for amnesty," he said. "I do believe there needs to be a policy of law whereby people can apply for citizenship but must do so within certain parameters, and if not they need to leave."

Southern Baptists in Greenville operate mission churches and provide assistance to immigrants without regard to their legal status, according to Ron Davis, director of missions for the Greenville Baptist Association.