

Illegal immigrant crackdown would backfire on Pa.

Published: Sunday, September 18, 2011

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If you believe the majority of witnesses at the recent House State Government Committee hearings in Harrisburg, you would think illegal immigration is the single-biggest problem confronting the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Speaker after speaker blamed unauthorized immigrant workers for unemployment, crime and budget woes.

As one of the witnesses, I understand the frustration over the failure of the federal government to fix our dysfunctional immigration system, but the raft of Arizona-style bills the committee is weighing would take the state in the wrong direction.

Pennsylvania faces many challenges, but the inflow of too many hardworking immigrants is not among them. Pennsylvania is one of the slowest-growing states. It ranks 30th in the share of the population that is foreign born, and illegal immigrants are only 1.3 percent of the state population, ranking it 40th among the states.

It might produce a good sound bite, but it is misleading to claim that every low-skilled immigrant chased out of Pennsylvania will mean a job for an unemployed American. The real-world economy doesn't work that way. Low-skilled immigrants do not compete directly with the large majority of American workers.

More aggressive enforcement against illegal immigration will hurt Pennsylvania's economy. Removing low-skilled immigrant workers from the labor force would reduce investment and production in such industries as agriculture, retail, tourism, construction and landscaping. It would reduce the related job openings in more skilled positions, reducing employment for native-born middle-class Americans. Less investment and employment would in turn reduce government revenue.

The answer to illegal immigration is not to criminalize honest work but to change our national immigration system to meet the future labor needs of our nation. We need to expand channels for legal immigration through a robust temporary worker program. Immigration reform would replace the current population of illegal immigrant workers with a legalized population, to the benefit of the immigrants and native-born.

It is wrong to blame undocumented immigrants for unleashing a crime wave as more than one witness claimed. There is no evidence that illegal immigrants in Pennsylvania are causing a general increase in the crime rate. Nationwide, the rate of violent crime in the last two decades has plunged during a time when the undocumented population was rising rapidly. In fact, illegal immigrants typically seek to avoid any encounter with law enforcement that could lead to deportation.

Arizona-type laws would make life more difficult for Pennsylvania law enforcement officers. By deputizing them as agents for federal immigration enforcement, legislators would be diverting resources away from combating real crime. More police hours and jail space will be consumed with prosecuting dishwashers and janitors rather than rapists and robbers.

A state-level crackdown will only push undocumented immigrants further underground. They will be less likely to cooperate with law enforcement and come forward as witnesses. This is why the Arizona Association of Chiefs of Police opposed that state's S.B. 1070.

As for the state budget, illegal immigration has not caused a surge in public school enrollment. The share of Pennsylvania's population enrolled in K-12 public schools is almost exactly the same today — 14.1 percent — as it was 20 years ago and significantly lower than in 1970 when baby boomers were crowding classrooms.

Pennsylvania's school-age population is the fourth-lowest in the nation as a share of the total population. Legislators should be far more worried about why so few future workers and taxpayers are moving through the educational pipeline than about the relatively few additional students whose parents are here illegally.

As Texas Gov. Rick Perry will tell you, his state has led the nation in employment and economic growth in the last decade by keeping taxes and regulations in check. Texas also is a state with 10 times as many illegal immigrants in its workforce as Pennsylvania. Those low-skilled immigrant workers have not been a barrier to economic growth and job creation in Texas. In fact, they have helped residents there to be more productive at home and more competitive in global markets.

The same can be true for Pennsylvania. State legislators in Harrisburg should focus their time on creating a better business climate at home while urging the congressional delegation in Washington to expand opportunities for legal immigration through comprehensive reform.