opinion

Guest Commentary: A bright IDEA for both the economy and immigration

By Rep. Jared Polis

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Americans are urging Congress and the Obama administration to confront the challenge of cutting unnecessary spending while creating jobs. Some in Congress aren't getting the message. They're proposing to waste $1 billion of taxpayer money on a failed employment verification program called E-Verify while simultaneously denying American businesses access to a highly skilled workforce.

E-Verify's stated goal is to prevent immigrants from working illegally. It doesn't. The program fails to correctly identify 50 percent of unauthorized workers. It does, however, brand fully legal Americans as illegal. If the program were made national, E-Verify's error rate would result in the firing of nearly 800,000 fully legal American workers that the system falsely identifies as ineligible to work.
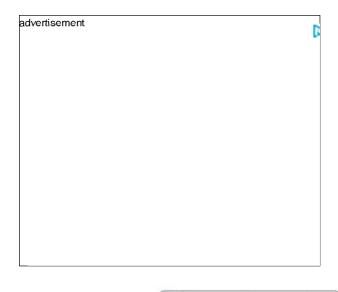
America's engine of job creation — our small businesses — are hurt by E-Verify as well. According to a Bloomberg Government study, U.S. employers would pay $2.6 billion to comply with E-Verify. The government's own regulatory impact analysis revealed that a company with as few as 10 employees would pay an extra $1,254 annually.

Rather than wasting taxpayer dollars, destroying jobs, and slapping new unfunded mandates on small businesses, Congress should be supporting the continued growth of the high-wage technology sector. One bill in Congress would do just that.

The Immigration Driving Entrepreneurship in America (IDEA) Act, which I cosponsor with Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., would ensure that U.S.-educated immigrants with s cience, technology, engineering and math (STEM) graduate degrees can stay in the U.S. to support the growth of American companies. The shortage of these workers in the U.S. undermines our ability to compete globally. That's why the IDEA Act also invests the visa fees paid by these new Americans in scholarships and grants that will support American-born students pursuing STEM degrees.

Under the IDEA Act, visas would also be provided to immigrant entrepreneurs and investors who can prove that they have created at least 10 jobs for Americans.

Given the fact that more than half of Silicon

Valley startups were founded or co-founded by immigrants, and that immigrant-founded companies created $52 billion in sales and employed 450,000 American workers in 2005, the IDEA Act has tremendous job-creating potential. This legislation will create more high-paying, high-tech jobs for Americans, get the economy growing again, and help close the budget deficit.
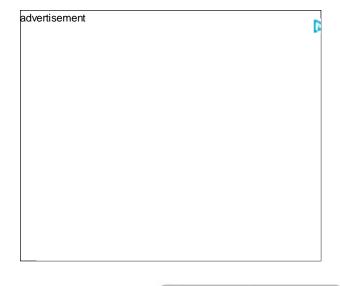
The IDEA Act would be a step towards passing comprehensive immigration reform, which would provide even larger benefits. Requiring the 10 million immigrants living in America illegally to get right with the law and pay back taxes and fees would generate as much as $5.4 billion in new revenue, according to the Center for American Progress. The Cato Institute, a conservative think tank, also found that forcing undocumented immigrants to get right with the law would boost the incomes of U.S. households by $180 billion a year by 2019, further increasing tax revenues.

Contrast the economic benefits of the IDEA Act or comprehensive immigration reform to the damage of E-Verify. According to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, a national E-Verify program would slash tax revenues by $17.3 billion as workers currently paying taxes began accepting their wages off the books.

Despite these facts, some in Congress seem intent on passing E-Verify and opposing the IDEA Act.

Times are tough for American workers, so it's easy to play politics with immigration policy. It's easy to pin the economic hardships of American families on a nameless, faceless group of immigrants. But that's not leadership. That's not a solution. It won't make our economy stronger, our families more economically secure, or our failed immigration policy suddenly sane, humane or workable.

It's time to stop the flawed and expensive E-Verify program and, while we wait for comprehensive immigration reform, pass the IDEA Act to grow our economy, save taxpayer dollars, and create American jobs.

U.S. Rep. Jared Polis, a Democrat, represents Colorado's 2nd Congressional District.