

Immigration Myths: Facts underline the need for comprehensive reform

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21, a college student from Elba, N.Y., holds a sign under a giant American flag while attending the March 21 rally for immigration reform on the National Mall in Washington.

By Jose Perez, Barrie Gewanter and Aly Wane

On March 21, we joined a busload of Central New Yorkers on a trip to Washington, D.C., where tens of thousands of people rallied for comprehensive immigration reform. We returned home ready to face the usual barrage of falsehoods that poison our national discourse on immigration — myths meant to demonize immigrants and prevent reform. These myths capitalize on well-intentioned people's fears and ignore the crucial role that generations of immigrants have played in making America a prosperous and vibrant nation. They conflict with American values of fairness and justice for all. Achieving sensible immigration reform that respects everyone's rights and dignity depends on countering myths with reality. Here are some important facts about immigrants in our country:

* Immigrants contribute far more in taxes than they use in government services. They pay sales, property, income and Social Security taxes even though most of them are ineligible for the social service programs these taxes are used for — such as food stamps or Medicaid — unless they have been here for five years as lawful permanent residents. According to the National Academy of Sciences, immigrants on average pay \$80,000 more in taxes than they receive in government benefits over their lifetimes.

* Federal and state taxes, Medicare, etc., are withheld from the paychecks of undocumented workers, but many employers do not provide these workers W-2 forms. A report from the Immigration Policy Center and the Center for American Progress found that legalization of undocumented immigrants would generate up to \$5.4 billion in tax revenues over three years — that's more than \$188,000 per hour.

* Immigrant farmworkers are vital to Upstate New York's agricultural economy. In the Central New York region, they fill low-paying, seasonal farm jobs that local residents don't want. The Cornell University Farmworker Program found that New York farmers consistently express difficulty finding reliable local labor to work on their farms. Without the immigrant farmworkers, crops would spoil on the vine. According to the American Farm Bureau, this could result in a loss of \$9 billion in U.S. agricultural production.

* Instituting a path to legalization for immigrant workers would strengthen the national economy. The President's Council of Economic Advisers maintains that immigrant workers increase consumer demand, fuel new businesses and spur job growth. Even the Cato Institute, a conservative think tank, recently found that a legalization program would boost U.S. household incomes by \$180 billion.

* The U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform has found lower crime levels among people who are foreign-born than those born in the United States. Yet, current immigration laws force immigrants into the shadows where they are reluctant to report crime or provide information to police out of fear that they or their loved ones will be deported. The Major Cities Chiefs Association, an organization composed of the chiefs of the 63 largest police departments in the United States and Canada, argues that using local and state police to enforce federal immigration laws weakens public safety.

The mythmakers often portray immigrants as sinister intruders who take advantage of America to the detriment of its citizens. The truth is that immigrants were essential to the foundation and development of many Upstate cities, and still contribute to our cultural vitality. One only has to sample the food and music at the many festivals held in downtown Syracuse each summer to recognize the continued importance of our immigrant heritage.

Nationally, our economy depends on immigrant workers — on farms, in factories, in offices, and in our communities — but our immigration system makes it nearly impossible for them to come here legally or to stay here within our laws.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security reports that between 2006 and 2007, citizenship applications doubled from 730,000 to 1.38 million. Tremendous backlogs delay processing of citizenship and visa applications for years, forcing immigrants who want to migrate legally to the United States or become citizens into a bureaucratic limbo that also leaves businesses without the labor they need to succeed.

The estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the country have virtually no way to achieve legal status. They live under constant threat of being torn from their families and communities, locked up indefinitely and deported. We can't "fix" the system by raiding people's homes and workplaces. It is impractical and immoral to tear apart families by deporting millions of people.

Any comprehensive immigration reform bill must provide a realistic pathway to citizenship for immigrants already here, but there would be no free passes. One reform bill proposed by U.S. Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D-Ill.), would require undocumented

immigrants to pay a \$500 fine, learn English and undergo a criminal background check in order to remain here.

Reform legislation must also tackle another myth — the notion that constitutional rights don't apply to undocumented immigrants. The U.S. Constitution guarantees every person due process under the law — regardless of immigration status. Yet, in many cases, our immigration system prevents judges from considering any individual circumstances before a person is detained, sometimes for years, often without bail and without access to lawyers or to their families. Reform must restore due process, independent judicial review and basic fairness to the immigration system.

Reform must not endanger our liberty and privacy rights by imposing a national worker ID card system with biometric information about every U.S. worker. This would be an impractical and expensive proposal that would enhance the government's ability to track our daily activities.

Nearly everyone in the United States descended from immigrants. Throughout our history, our nation's success has depended on the contributions of people with the courage, wisdom and strength to come to our shores and forge a better life. Our immigration laws must embrace this truth.

It's time to dispel the myths once and for all. It's time for Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., to introduce an immigration reform bill that respects the rights of all and restores the fundamental guarantees of fairness that have made the United States a beacon of freedom and justice throughout the world.

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