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Speakers to advocate boost in legal immigration

By REID FORGRAVE • rforgrave@dmreg.com • June 17, 2010

On the surface, the two men speaking today at a handful of immigration forums in Des Moines could hardly come from more different places.

Daniel Griswold is the director of the Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian public policy research group. He used to be the editorial page editor at a newspaper in Colorado Springs, one of the most conservative cities in the nation. Griswold's views are colored by an ideology of limited government.

The views of Raul Hinojosa-Ojeda, however, are colored by other things: His life as a Mexican immigrant raised in Chicago. His political advocacy as the originator of the idea of the North American Development Bank, a collaboration between the United States and Mexico. His work as an associate professor at the University of California-Los Angeles' Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies.

But the two men's views converge on one of the most heated topics in American politics. They believe the nation needs comprehensive immigration reform, and that the right reform would help the U.S. economy.

"It gives extra validation to what we're saying," said Griswold, who has a master's degree from the London School of Economics. "Dr. Hinojosa and myself come at this from very different backgrounds, different spots on the political spectrum. And yet we come to the same conclusion."

Their conclusion is that increased, legal immigration of low-skilled immigrants would be a big boost to the U.S. economy. Comprehensive immigration reform would consist of legalizing those already working here, expanding opportunities for more legal immigration and intelligently enforcing laws against those still operating outside the system.

Cato Institute research indicates a larger economy with more legal immigrant workers would also create more opportunities for middle-class workers, more investment in industry, and money spent not on smuggling but in fees.

According to Griswold's research, U.S. households would be better off by \$180 billion a year with comprehensive immigration reform. That would be a 1 percent increase in annual household income.

In a recent study, "Raising the Floor for American Workers," Hinojosa-Ojeda was critical of a U.S. immigration policy that focuses solely on enforcement, saying it has failed for more than two decades to stop unauthorized immigration and has decreased wages in a number of industries.

Comprehensive immigration reform, Hinojosa-Ojeda concluded, "would raise the 'wage floor' for the entire U.S. economy - to the benefit of both immigrant and native-born workers."

Possible benefits would be raising wages, increasing consumption, creating jobs and generating new tax revenue, his report said.

Lori Chesser, a Des Moines immigration attorney on the steering committee of the Iowa Immigration Education Coalition, the organization sponsoring today's events, said the events are intended for education, not advocacy.

"We're trying to just get a dialogue going," Chesser said.

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