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BUSINESS LEADERS: LET'S EMPLOY ASYLUM SEEKERS

By **Justin Yancy**

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As president of the **Texas Business Leadership Council**, nearly every day I hear from business leaders across Texas about their need for labor, with a high demand for data analysts, health care workers, cybersecurity professionals, and many positions in manufacturing. As of March 2023, we still had more than 800,000 job openings in the state, and we're creating jobs faster than we can fill them. Texas ranks first in the nation in over-the-year jobs added in 2022, according to the Texas Workforce Commission.

Yet there's a huge untapped workforce that Texas businesses are unable to access: asylum seekers who are waiting for their cases to be heard. Under current law, migrants can become eligible to work in the U.S. 180 days after they apply for asylum. But given current backlogs, many wait for eight to 12 months before they receive a work permit. This puts a tremendous financial burden on the local governments and nonprofits supporting migrants who are here looking to support themselves.

Migrants should not have to wait months to gain work authorization. We must revise the decades-old laws that mandate this waiting period. It's preventing them from being self-sufficient and keeping them from working for businesses who are desperate for labor.

I support practical immigration reform that strengthens Texas businesses without compromising our nation's security. The chaos that critics claimed would overwhelm the border when Title 42 ended last month never materialized. U.S. border agents have once again been able to accept asylum seekers at ports of entry and hear their claims with relative order and calm.

Of course, major problems at the border do persist. We lack the funding, staffing and resources to efficiently process everyone who arrives at our doorstep. There are over 1.3 million pending asylum applications -- and the average case takes 4.25 years to weave through our immigration courts. This means we can't quickly deport people who lack valid claims, but it also means that we can't adequately support people who do qualify.

The nonpartisan American Immigration Council recently published a report offering practical solutions for tackling the border crisis. In addition to recommendations for making the border more secure and humane, the authors urge Congress to address the pressing needs of people

who are already in the U.S. waiting for their claims to be processed. This includes lifting the restrictions on asylum seekers' work authorization. Both Democrats in the House and Republicans and Independents in the Senate have introduced bills to reduce the work authorization waiting period to 30 days and to streamline the permit renewal process.

These solutions should not be controversial. As the authors of the AIC report explain, "Rebuilding a functional system does not require a radical overhaul of U.S. immigration law. Nor will it lead to open borders." We all benefit from a stronger, more efficient immigration system. The authors also recommend that we "abandon the deterrence-focused mindset in favor of managing humanitarian flows in safe, fair, efficient, and predictable ways." That includes giving people the tools to get on their feet instead of keeping them in detention or leaving them to languish on the streets.

Our refugee program, which allows refugees from environmental and humanitarian disasters to work as soon as they arrive in the U.S., provides a successful model. Refugees receive more resources and support than asylum-seekers all around. This allows them to become self-sufficient and, eventually, to thrive here: One study found that after 25 years in the country, refugees have a median income of \$14,000 more than the American average. We also know that immigrants start more businesses than U.S.-born citizens, and they are more willing to relocate to where workers are needed most.

We're happy to see these issues being discussed in Washington, D.C., in federal bills such as with the House and Senate versions of the Asylum Seeker Work Authorization Act. The bipartisan Dignity Act, introduced by Representatives Maria Elvira Salazar (R-FL) and Veronica Escobar (D-TX), would also give a wide range of immigrants -- from farm workers to high-skilled workers-- a better shot of coming here to work in the industries where they're needed most.

We need this kind of bipartisan support to create tangible, lasting change. For Texas businesses, it can't come soon enough.

***Justin Yancy** is President of the **Texas Business Leadership Council** and has served in the administrations of then-Gov. George W. Bush and Gov. Rick Perry.*