

Caller Times

OPINION: WHEN IT COMES TO IMMIGRATION, TEXAS CAN LEAD ON INNOVATIVE ECONOMIC SOLUTIONS

By **Bobby Jenkins**

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The coronavirus pandemic brought on many challenges to our communities, homes, and businesses. As we continue to face instabilities from ongoing crises both domestically and abroad, there is one thing our elected officials should find common ground on to boost our economic outlook for the foreseeable future: reforming the U.S. immigration system to match workers across all skill sets with available jobs.

Immigrants have long improved Texas industries, making up large shares of our workforce in a variety of sectors, from construction to food production and services to healthcare, and representing nearly a quarter of our overall workforce. They are major economic multipliers, holding an estimated total annual spending power of over \$120 billion, and they contribute to state programs such as transportation, education, and social services through \$40 billion in state and local taxes annually.

However, our nation's antiquated and complex immigration system has rendered it almost impossible for immigrants to fully join the workforce in a meaningful capacity due to a lack of authorization, inaccessible work permits, or uncertainty of what will come next in terms of legal status. Even though about 1.6 million undocumented Texans contribute the same as any other citizen - to the tune of \$6.5 billion in state, local and federal taxes - and are vital to our economic well-being, current policies prevent them from building a stable future.

As Texas Gov. Greg Abbott recently stated during a fireside chat around the state's economy, "The workforce propels businesses; the workforce propels Texas." However, cultivating a stable, balanced workforce with people of all skill levels is a tricky business, and key industries - such as construction and home services, among others - are struggling to hire employees. I have witnessed this firsthand. My company, ABC Home & Commercial Services, is facing difficulties hiring employees of all skill sets. Nationally, 51 percent of small businesses had openings that they could not fill at the end of last year.

While some businesses are starting to take matters into their own hands by leaving the status quo and implementing new operations, leaders at the state level are also working to address labor issues. The Texas Workforce Commission directed nearly \$20 million in funds for programs dedicated

to training workers to fill job openings, and several industries, such as the energy sector, have resorted to upping pay and benefits.

However, more can and must be done to get more workers on the job, and efforts at the federal level must provide innovative and forward-thinking solutions for all Texans. Texas representatives in both the House and Senate must pass immigration reform to recognize the true economic potential of Texas' immigrant community and allow qualified, skilled workers to join our workforce.

If our leaders in Congress do not address this issue soon, we will have to face even greater labor challenges. Today, experienced workers are aging out of the industry, and there are not nearly enough applicants from the younger generations who want to work in laborious fields such as construction, agriculture, and building/grounds maintenance.

What we need are ready and able workers, and the public also agrees, with the majority of Americans supporting a pathway to citizenship.

It is my hope that the conversation around immigration reform continues to shift as more and more leaders and communities recognize the enormous benefits of immigration becoming more apparent than ever. Texas representatives in Congress must see the urgency of this situation and work with their colleagues to pass immigration reform measures such as the Dream Act and Farm Workforce Modernization Act that will help our state to succeed.

As Texans and as the state with the ninth largest economy in the world by GDP, we must bring innovative and forward-thinking solutions to the table. Immigration reform is a good place to start.

Bobby Jenkins is the CEO of ABC Home & Commercial Services and chairman of the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority.