



LESS-SKILLED WORKER VISAS

Why we need less-skilled immigrants. Economists agree that growth requires two critical ingredients: innovation and a growing labor force. The U.S. workforce has changed dramatically in recent decades. As Americans become better educated, employers have increasing difficulty finding workers to fill low-skilled jobs. In 1950, more than half of American workers were high school dropouts willing to do physically demanding, low-skilled work. Today the figure is less than 5 percent. But many U.S. businesses still need less-skilled workers to meet customers' needs and remain competitive.

Guest workers are the best border security. The problem: there is virtually no legal way for less-skilled foreigners without family in the U.S. to enter the country and work in year-round nonfarm jobs. The two existing programs for less-skilled temporary workers are for seasonal labor only, and there are virtually no permanent visas for less-skilled workers. The all-but inevitable result is large-scale illegal immigration.

A market-driven program robust enough to divert the illegal flow. A new temporary worker program should respond in real time to changing U.S. labor needs, growing in good years when the economy needs more foreign workers and shrinking in down times when more Americans are out of work. It should also be robust enough to divert and rechannel the existing influx of illegal immigrants. Every year from 2003 to 2009, more than 350,000 unauthorized immigrants entered the U.S. to fill jobs for which there were not enough willing and able Americans. A program that cannot absorb and accommodate this flow will not succeed in ending illegal immigration.

Enough time to train workers and recoup costs. It's called "less-skilled" labor, but even the least educated workers who fill many jobs in construction, food processing, hospitality, health care and cleaning and maintenance need training to work productively and maintain safety standards – and companies need to hold onto workers long enough to recoup training and administrative costs. A temporary worker program that does not allow workers to stay long enough to be productive will not work for employers – and in the long run, it will not work to rechannel illegal immigration.

Fact Construction contractors often invest \$5,000 to \$10,000 to train workers, and it can take two to four years before an employee is fully productive.

Fact A typical meat processing plant spends \$5,000 to recruit and train an employee, and the process can take up to 90 days.

Fact Hotels enrolled in the existing H-2B seasonal temporary worker program say that hiring a visa worker entails up to \$13,000 in administrative and other costs. Training is not extensive – generally not more than a few weeks – but it takes time for employees to learn the company culture and what's expected when they interact with guests.

The best antidote to illegal immigration is a legal immigration system that works. Legislation circulating in the House Judiciary Committee would create a new less-skilled visa program designed to meet the needs of employers who rely on immigrant workers. We urge you to support a bill that would help restore the rule of law in the workplace and provide the workforce employers need to keep their businesses open and contributing to the economy.