Link immigration quota to job demands

Editorial

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We are still not getting immigration right.

The U.S. Senate has begun holding hearings on immigration reform as the Obama administration issues new guidelines that focus the government's attention on employers who hire illegal workers, rather than on the workers themselves.

This is a more humane approach, an improvement over the worker raids employed by the Bush administration. The raids were cruel and pointless. As The New York Times pointed out, the Bush raids netted 6,000 of 12 million undocumented immigrants and 135 bosses, while doing untold damage to families.

A focus on employers, particularly those engaged in smuggling, visa fraud or physical abuse of workers, puts the blame more where it belongs. But it doesn't solve the economic problem.

The economy, at least until the current downturn, created a demand for roughly 1.5 million immigrant workers a year. But the country's annual immigration quotas let less than 1 million in, producing a spillover of about a half-million illegal workers, according to immigration expert Tamar Jacoby, president of ImmigrationWorks USA, a national federation of businesses.

The immigrants come to work. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, the California Democrat, told a Senate hearing that her state's ailing agricultural sector could lose as much as $3.3 billion this year because of a shortage of laborers. Few Americans take the jobs, Feinstein said.

What is needed is a guest worker program that will provide the workers the economy needs. Ideally, the immigration quota would be tied to the demands of the labor market, and new arrivals would have at least a distant chance to become citizens, if they so desire. But citizenship programs have proved a hard sell, in part because it could put illegal immigrants in line ahead of those waiting for the chance to come to this country legally.

A way around this dilemma was proposed last fall by U.S. Rep. Christopher Shays of Bridgeport. Shays proposed creating a new "blue card" category of immigration, to allow undocumented immigrants with no criminal records to stay and work. But unlike "green card" immigrants, they would not be on a path to citizenship. For that, they would have to go back to their countries and wait in line.

Such a program would protect immigrants from exploitation and give employers the workers they need. Mr. Shays lost his bid for re-election, and the blue card proposal was forgotten. Perhaps it ought to be dusted off.