

A program that works

TODAY'S COLUMNIST

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While there are differences in the priorities people assign to the different aspects of immigration reform, nearly everyone agrees that there are three parts to really solving our immigration problems: security, economic participation and civic integration.

By authorizing a more secure fence along some of the most frequently trespassed parts of our border, Congress made a first step on the security issue. But, without some way of monitoring immigrants within the country, this is only a partial answer to the security issue. Moreover, economic participation and civic integration remain untouched.

On their return, members of Congress have the opportunity to expand and improve a relatively small but highly successful part of our immigration policy that meets all three challenges. The H1-B visa program allows companies to bring in workers from overseas who possess skills that are not available domestically. The main users of the program are technology and health-care companies, although a number of highly skilled people in finance also work here under this program.

The H1-B program meets all three parts of the immigration policy challenge. First, it provides security within the country. The companies hiring these workers have already gone through a vetting process sufficient to justify their employment. Moreover, the employer naturally has a detailed and working knowledge of the whereabouts and day-to-day activities of the people involved.

Second, the program obviously involves economic participation by the immigrant. In many cases, particularly in technology, America has the choice between allowing these immigrants to work in America for American companies, or forcing our country and its businesses to compete with these workers in their homeland. We can either import these workers and export at least a part of their production or import the goods that they will produce if they remain at home.

Moreover, these workers are overwhelmingly net contributors to the economy and to the government's fiscal position. While a low skilled worker earning about \$8.50 an hour will receive Social Security benefits \$65,000 greater than the taxes paid, the great majority of H1-B workers will contribute at least as much in taxes as they ultimately receive in benefits. So, the economic participation of H1-B workers is an unambiguous gain for America.

Finally, there is the issue of civic participation. In the broad scheme of things, this must start with an immigrant having appropriate documentation. It should include the full panoply of rights and responsibilities that come with residing in America, and in some instances, it might end with citizenship. Congress wrestled with this issue earlier this

year. But, the H1-B visa program is a working model of an approach to immigration that provides an opportunity for civic integration for those who participate.

Ideally, the H1-B visa program could be a model for broader immigration reform. But, in the meantime, Congress should extend and enlarge the program enough to meet the current and pressing needs of our economy for these workers. The current H1-B quota is full through the end of the current fiscal year, or until October 2007. Few government programs work this well, particularly regarding immigration. When they come along, Congress should take full advantage of them.

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