

Immigration reform needed now

Jul. 8, 2010 12:00 AM

As July 29 closes in, the uncertainty of SB 1070 looms large. The misdirected law, born from legitimate frustration over federal inaction, is creating more confusion than clarity and may well be unenforceable and unworkable.

While it's unclear what the recent legal challenges will do, it is certain that the law does nothing to make the border safer or fix a broken immigration system. Its consequences will reach far into the future, imperiling the state's social fabric and economic prospects.

The Arizona Interfaith Network applauds last week's statement of the state's business associations calling for comprehensive immigration reform. The statement lends credence to the contribution of immigration to our economy. It reminds us that welcoming the stranger is not a moralistic platitude but has real implications for the prosperity of the broader community.

We must reconsider our current path and how our interests converge with the newcomers. The state's changing demographics tie our future prosperity to immigration. The Baby Boomers, the best-skilled workers ever, are aging and retiring. By 2030, 25 percent of our state will be over 65, and someone must replace them in the workforce, purchase their homes and support their Social Security costs. The native-born population will not make up this gap. Arizona's school-age population is nearly half Latino, many the children of immigrants.

To diversify economically, Arizona needs young, motivated, highly skilled workers. Historically, immigrants brought to America the value of hard work, innovation and a desire to succeed and to belong. This is the crux of the American dream. Newcomers make life-changing sacrifices to come here, investing themselves in a new community and helping to generate a larger economic pie.

Immigrants pay taxes, contribute to spending and invest in things like housing.

In 2007, the University of Arizona's Udall Center produced a study acknowledging the costs and benefits of immigration, legal and illegal, during a more prosperous era. Yes, there are costs in education, health and public safety, about \$1.4 billion a year. These are outweighed by the tax contributions of \$2.4 billion. The study further says that the state's output would fall by \$29 billion if the undocumented were removed from Arizona.

But we still insist on driving young families from the state. Those leaving are not just the undocumented;

they are also citizens growing weary of the sustained nativist attitudes.

This diminishes communities, churches and schools. Other states will benefit from the investments we have made in them. Gone is their labor, their spending power and their tax dollars.

Now, the attacks are increasingly aimed at children, with threats to revoke birthplace citizenship and the right to public education, raising more constitutional questions.

Our nation has been through similar turmoil before, with previous waves of immigration from Eastern Europe, Asia and now Latin America. The tensions are heightened by periods of economic difficulty.

So much of current immigration is illegal because we have a broken system, with hopelessly backlogged applications of 20 years, separated families awaiting unification, and an antiquated visa system. More border troops do not address this reality.

The solution lies in fixing the visa system to align with economic needs, forging a pathway to legalization for the 11 million undocumented living in the shadows, reuniting broken families, designing a guest-worker program, and enforcing laws to ensure border safety and penalize unscrupulous employers.

We urge the president and Congress not only to speak out on the issue but to develop a timeline to act. We urge all Arizonans to study the issue deeply and broadly and to engage in constructive conversation about the reality facing us.

The state's future depends upon it.

The signers

The Arizona Interfaith Network:

- The Rev. Glenn Jenks, St. James Episcopal Church, Tempe.
- The Rev. Tex Sample, Asbury United Methodist Church, Phoenix.
- The Rev. Javier Perez, Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, Yuma.
- The Rev. James Geaney, O. Carm., Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Tucson.

Read more:

<http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/opinions/articles/2010/07/07/20100707interfaith08.html#ixzz0tCiM2bYI>