



BY WILLIAM F. FELICE
Guest Columnist

Immigrants are saving America

Let's find the courage to begin the arduous overhaul of our broken immigration system. Here are two places to start.



This construction on an apartment complex in Las Vegas is emblematic what will be needed here in Florida. With a shortage of construction workers and low unemployment, migrant labor is sorely needed for Florida to recover from the billions of dollars in damages inflicted by Hurricane Ian.

Construction of high-rise towers and low-rise townhouses in downtown St. Petersburg is booming. As I pass these multiple construction sites on my daily morning walks, it becomes obvious that Spanish is the main language spoken by the many building workers. Migrant labor as the backbone to the vitality and growth of the economy is quite visible.

Economists have confirmed such anecdotal observations. For example, during a recent webinar, Ken Simonson, chief economist at the Associated General Contractors of America, stated: “Construction is one of many industries that historically relied much more than they’ve been able to in the last three years on foreign-born workers.” The construction industry continues to face a serious workforce shortage. More than 90 percent of contractors nationwide report that they are struggling to hire workers. Making matters worse, a number key immigration programs “have been allowed to lapse.” As a result, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services reports that there is currently a backlog of roughly 1.5 million work permit applications.

With a shortage of construction workers and low unemployment, migrant labor is sorely needed for Florida to recover from the billions of dollars in damages inflicted by Hurricane Ian. Construction managers are keen to hire these eager workers. It is difficult to imagine how Florida can rebuild without them. According to the nonprofit Center for American Progress undocumented immigrants account for 23 percent of construction laborers, 38 percent of drywallers and 32 percent of roofers. Before Ian hit, Florida had more than 100,000 undocumented construction workers. The *Washington Post* reports that undocumented immigrants are “a nomadic new workforce that is chasing violent storms fueled by climate change, accounting for the vast majority of the day laborers who cleaned up after Hurricane Harvey in 2017 and Hurricane Ida last year.” Undocumented migrants are now working to restore storm damaged buildings in wealthy Sanibel Island and in Fort Myers. Federal law prohibits companies from knowingly employing workers in the country illegally. But companies know that the government is far more likely to deport immigrants than to punish those who hire them.

In agriculture, farmworkers from Mexico and Central America are the backbone for getting American produce from the fields into our supermarkets. Antonio De Loera-Brust, the former special assistant to the U.S. secretary of state, describes Mexican farmworkers as true American “heroes.” The COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in 2020, created a global crisis in food security. Mexican immigrant farmworkers, either undocumented or on H-2A guest worker visas, kept going to work during the emergency, and “paid a frightful price for being on the front line of the pandemic.” In addition to facing COVID, these farmworkers confront “one

of the deadliest industries in the United States” with low wages, unsafe working conditions, exposure to dangerous pesticides, deadly temperatures and wildfire smoke. These Mexican farmworkers are true American heroes. Their “hard and increasingly dangerous work kept a full-blown food crisis at bay.”

The Bipartisan Border Solutions Act was introduced in Congress last year to give the government resources to expand the capacity of the immigration system. It would provide funding for four new processing centers along the southern border and expand the system for making final asylum decisions by adding 150 immigration judges and 300 asylum officers. While the bill does not address the structural economic and political issues that propel people to risk the journey to the U.S., it does begin to correct the mechanics of asylum and immigration. It provides a beginning framework for progress. The bill was introduced by Senate Republicans John Cornyn of Texas and Thom Tillis of North Carolina and Democrats Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona and Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire.

In addition, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, known as the DREAM Act, is still stalled in Congress. This program provides working papers for children brought illegally to the U.S. before they were 16, have a clean record and have lived in the country at least five years. This group represents approximately 1.5 million children of foreign-born parents. According to the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute, these “Dreamers” contribute nearly \$42 billion to the U.S. gross domestic product each year.

As the election season draws to a close, we must move beyond railing against the undocumented and using migrants for political stunts. In recognition of the vital heroic work of our immigrant community, let’s find the courage to begin the arduous overhaul of our broken immigration system. Congressional approval of the Bipartisan Border Solutions Act and the DREAM Act would represent two critical steps forward.



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