

Change tone of rhetoric about immigration

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Nationally, we've seen an unprecedented focus on immigration at the state and local levels in the wake of Congress' failure to pass a comprehensive immigration reform package. More than 1,500 pieces of legislation related to immigration were introduced in the nation's 50 state legislatures last year.

Alabama is no different. Certain members of our Legislature, as well as a few municipal leaders, have sought to adopt laws aimed at "fixing" the perceived "immigration problem."

The undocumented worker has become a tool used by some elected officials to play on the fear of change felt by their constituents. Perhaps it is time to realize that the loudest voices do not always represent the majority's sentiment.

At the close of the 2007 legislative session, the Alabama Legislature adopted a resolution creating the 21-member Alabama Joint Interim Patriotic Immigration Commission to "conduct a fact-finding study on immigration issues."

In the course of its work, the commission held a handful of public hearings and heard from several interested state agency representatives. The commission's published report, apart from calling on our leaders in Congress to enact reform, lacked any viable solutions with which Alabama could correct the unauthorized flow of our southern neighbors.

In total, 26 immigration bills were filed during the 2008 legislative session. Like the commission's public hearings that preceded it, the legislative session was filled with the booming voices of anti-immigrant emotions, as well as those urging legislators to leave the matter to the federal government.

By the close of the session, not a single bill had reached either the House or Senate floors for debate. Last month, both presumed presidential candidates spoke to national immigrant rights organizations, and political analysts have discussed how both campaigns must court the Latino vote.

Is the wind of change blowing?

Polls repeatedly show that, despite the roundup and mass expulsion advocated by the loudest voices in the debate, the public has expressed support for solutions that go beyond deportation and enforcement only, and include a path to legal status for undocumented immigrants under certain conditions. Generally, these conditions include some combination of paying taxes, having a clean criminal record, learning English and paying a fine - all of which were included in the U.S. Senate bill filibustered to death in 2007.

One of the most quoted (or at least paraphrased) lines of our nation's founding documents is the first sentence of the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."

It is easy to say these principles are, in fact, the core values on which our country is based. Unfortunately, these values are imperiled by attacks on Alabama residents who immigrated to this country in search of a better life.

The current reactionary and, at times, hateful rhetoric about immigrants fails to recognize the economic and cultural contributions made by newcomers. An estimated 17.9 million immigrants are working in the U.S., accounting for 14 percent of the total civilian labor force. All immigrants, regardless of status, will pay on average \$80,000 per capita more in taxes than they use in government services over their lifetime.

The immigration debate is only complicated by policies and practices that disadvantage or dehumanize a race or culture of people.

Alabama has experienced, far better than any other, that state policies can either aid or hinder the integration of its citizens. Positive voices are needed to raise the debate about immigrants from one based on ill-conceived rhetoric to one that accurately reflects our nation's value system.

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