

Speaker's Stand ... Constructive Immigration Talk

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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 and endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights and that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."

It is easy to say that these principles are, in fact, the core values upon which our country is based. Unfortunately, these values are imperiled by attacks on Alabama residents who have immigrated to this country in search of a better life. Even arguments against immigration characterized as "only concerning those here illegally" impact the lives of all community members — irrespective of their documentation status.

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 currently working in the United States — accounting for 14 percent of the total civilian labor force. Compared to the native-born, a significantly higher percentage of immigrants are of working age (between 28 and 54 years of age).

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 Social Security system reaps the biggest windfall from taxes paid by immigrants; the Social Security Administration reports that it holds approximately \$420 billion from the earnings of immigrants who are not in a position to claim benefits.

The debate over immigration policy is only complicated by policies and practices that disadvantage or dehumanize a race or culture of people. Conversely, a welcoming atmosphere increases the ability and willingness of new immigrants to participate in the civic life of their new community.

A community that is open to dialogue — to discuss rationally and respectfully concerns and concrete facts — can expose unknown realities and dampen the hurtful banter that typically entrenches discussions of immigration.

Far better than any other state in the Union, Alabama has experienced that state policies can either aid or hinder the integration of its citizens. It is time to exchange hostility and emotion for rational public discourse designed to encourage open discussion of issues.

Positive voices are needed to raise the debate about immigrants from one based on ill-conceived rhetoric to one that more accurately reflects our nation's value system.

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