

Hire U.S. Workers First, Restore Integrity of U.S. Visa System

Written by Grassley Press
Thursday, 22 March 2012 12:53

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by U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley

With spring just around the corner, many lowans look forward to seasonal rites of passage this time of year. Farmers are itching to get in the fields. Home gardeners anticipate the first shoots of peas and lettuce. Spring cleaning tops the to-do list for many families. School students give thanks for Spring Break. And, soon-to-be-college graduates have their sights set on landing a job.

It's no secret the Class of 2012 needs to break into a job market struggling to rebound from Wall Street's financial meltdown and mortgage industry mess. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports the unemployment rate is idling at 8.3 percent. This year's crop of graduates also will be competing with more than five million jobless Americans who have been looking for work for longer than six months.

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Yet, the Obama administration has proposed federal rules to “attract and retain highly skilled immigrants” that arguably increase the competition for Americans who are looking for work.

Is this really the administration’s idea of priming the employment pump?

In Iowa, civic and business leaders work together in their communities to grease the wheels for economic development. From Council Bluffs to Keokuk, local economic development leaders search for ways to attract and keep businesses. They go to bat for their towns because they know their labor pool is ready and willing to work.

So, flooding the employment market with foreign workers, when high-skilled Americans are seeking jobs at unprecedented levels, just doesn’t square with improving the home team advantage, let alone fostering a level playing field.

From my leadership position on the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, I have championed reforms to the nation’s immigration and visa laws to better protect the pool of highly-skilled, unemployed U.S. workers and graduates who struggle to find good-paying jobs here at home.

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For example, the H1-B visa program was created in 1990 as a temporary measure to help companies in America find high-technology workers -- assuming specialized workers aren't available in the United States to fill these jobs. After more than two decades on the books, the program needs better controls and stronger oversight that will prevent qualified American workers from being passed over for good-paying jobs.

That's why over the last several years I've introduced an H-1B visa reform bill that would require a good faith recruitment of American workers by all companies seeking to bring in foreign workers, change the wage requirements to ensure that visa holders are not undercutting American workers, give more authority to the Department of Labor to investigate allegations of fraud, prohibit employers from advertising only to H-1B visa holders, and increase penalties for those who violate the terms of the H-1B visa program.

Working with Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, I've also urged the administration to formally adopt the standards set by the U.S. Department of State and the Administrative Appeals Office of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services when adjudicating L-1B visas (a visa that allows employers to transfer its existing workers to the U.S. if they have "specialized" or "advanced" knowledge of the company). Unfortunately, the Obama administration is considering changes to the L-1B visa program that could water down these standards and allow the L-1B visa program to be used as a back door to evade restrictions of the H-1B visa program, putting American workers at a disadvantage.

Out-of-work Americans and graduates of the Class of 2012 have enough hurdles to overcome. The nation's visa system should not undermine their chances of landing a good-paying job.

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