

Study cites immigrants' economic impact

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Iowa's economy would lose \$4.4 billion in annual spending if all undocumented workers were exported from the state, a spokesman for a national advocacy group said Thursday.

"If you looked at just the beneficial impact of the hardworking immigrants in this state, even the undocumented ones, you'd see a tremendous benefit from the labor that they're performing," said Brent Wilkes, the national executive director of the League of United Latin American Citizens.

Wilkes was a member of a five-person panel in Des Moines that discussed Iowa's continuing struggle with immigration issues. The forum was held at Des Moines Area Community College's urban campus.

The impact estimate comes from a report conducted for Americans for Immigration Reform by the Perryman Group, a Texas financial analysis firm. It estimated that eliminating the estimated 8.1 million undocumented workers in the United States would cause \$1.757 trillion in annual lost spending and \$651.5 billion in lost output.

There are almost 25,200 undocumented workers in Iowa, according to the report.

Wilkes and other panel members noted projected labor shortages in the state, saying immigrants help fill a gap that would otherwise place hardships on the state's economy.

Rep. Kraig Paulsen, a Republican from Hiawatha, said strict focus upon the benefits of undocumented laborers ignores the real issue.

"That really misses the entire point," said Paulsen, who did not attend the forum.

"At the end of the day, these people are either here legally or illegally. How much money they spend doesn't all of a sudden legitimize that they're here illegally," he said.

Thursday's immigration panel members generally spoke in favor of better federal enforcement of existing laws. They also advocated policies allowing illegal immigrants already in the United States the opportunity to become citizens.

Members also generally agreed that legislative proposals in Iowa to curb illegal immigration will probably fail unless they are adopted in conjunction with federal efforts.

Several legislative proposals dealing with immigration failed during this year's legislative session. Lawmakers of both parties said the state should act because federal government has long failed to get a grip on the problem.

One of the key legislative ideas would have prevented employers from hiring undocumented workers as independent contractors, which is a method sometimes used to skirt immigration laws.

Beth Wessel-Kroeschell, a Democrat from Ames who was one of Thursday's speakers, said Iowa should close the independent contractor loophole. But she criticized federal immigration raids as "making no impact whatsoever on the real problem."

Davenport resident Henry Vargas was one of about 150 people who attended the forum.

He told the panel that it's time for Iowa residents and lawmakers to take charge of the issue.

"You've got to stop passing the buck to the feds," Vargas said.