

# **We must resolve to fix our immigration system**

**By STAN MAREK  
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The U.S. Department of Homeland Security recently announced an additional round of employer I-9 immigration audits, including 42 in Houston and 161 in Texas overall. The announcement demonstrates the Obama administration's desire to seek solutions and yet also reflects our broken immigration system. In recent years, immigration has polarized the American public and our elected representatives; the issue affects many and in Texas it affects us all. Deportation of an estimated 8.3 million undocumented workers is unrealistic and amnesty is not viable.

Let's look at the reality of the situation for Houston and our surrounding communities. Estimates from the Pew Hispanic Center and confirmed by our own Greater Houston Partnership indicate that there are approximately 1.3 million undocumented workers in Texas.

The best way to understand the impact of the pending audits is to look at our undocumented population and divide them into two groups.

The first is made up of the undocumented who work for companies that have complied with the law. These companies fill out I-9s on every appropriate employee, pay applicable payroll taxes, workmen's compensation and in many cases offer benefits like health care, pay for time off, and make matching contributions to 401(K) accounts. In most cases, these employees circumvented the system by adopting someone else's Social Security number, using a fraudulent card that to an average American looks real. This practice has been going on since the Immigration Reform Act of 1986 made the Social Security card the "national worker ID."

The second group is in the underground economy. It includes day laborers or employees whose employers classify them as independent subcontractors. Most are paid in cash and few pay any kind of payroll tax. They also work without workmen's compensation and when injured, find their way to our emergency rooms. They do not have I-9s identifying them, nor do they enjoy the protection of our country's wage and hour laws. Let me add that as an advocate of social justice, I am convinced these workers choose to work in this system because it's their only option. They risk their lives to get here and have no legal options under the current law.

Regardless of how you feel about these workers, there is one thing no one can refute. As audits increase and recommended use of DHS's Internet-based E-Verify system becomes a reality, more undocumented workers presently employed by legitimate employers will find their way into the second group.

No, they won't return to their home countries. They own homes, have children in our schools and are part of our community. What they will do is find a way to survive. They will work for cash, labor for long hours with no overtime pay, and be subject to employers who might not pay them. This only puts more strain on our public hospitals, school infrastructure and social service agencies.

I find it hard to fault the Department of Homeland Security. As former DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff told a group of us last year, our government enforces the laws as written. What we need is sensible immigration reform that deals with our broken system.

We can continue to ignore the impact on our community, which is horrific, or we can do something about it.

With neither amnesty nor deportation as an option, what is the middle ground? The Greater Houston Partnership, through its affiliate Americans for Immigration Reform, proposes these measures: First, secure our borders. Second, identify every undocumented worker, require criminal background checks and mandate that all employees, including citizens, have a tamper-proof identification card that works with E-Verify.

The majority of presently undocumented workers should be working for an employer and paying taxes, not working as independent subcontractors. Reforming our laws requires a worker program and a realistic policy to deal with the undocumented workers already here in America who contribute to our economic prosperity.

Texas ranks second only to California in the number of undocumented workers. The current census of students in our Texas schools stands at 4,656,516. Of those, 2,193,345 are of Hispanic descent. Those with limited English number 774,719. Estimates are that there are 3.5 million American-born children with one or more undocumented parents in our country. Many live in Texas. What will be the impact of our current immigration policy on our next generation of Texans?

Like it or not, this is the current situation. To do nothing will be a mistake that will only cause our present problems to get worse for years to come.

Please write your elected officials to settle this issue now. We can't wait any longer.

*Marek is a Houston businessman and a board member of Americans for Immigration Reform, founded by the Greater Houston Partnership.*