

Shift sought on immigration

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Written by

[Jens Manuel Krogstad](#)

A coalition of Midwestern leaders hopes to “give Washington a kick” and jump-start progress on stalled immigration reform, something it calls the key to economic growth.

The task force, co-chaired by former Iowa Gov. Chet Culver and organized by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, is pushing for progress through smaller pieces of legislation, instead of waiting for Congress to pass one comprehensive bill.

To build bipartisan consensus, the group is focusing on how increased immigration can boost U.S. competitiveness in a global economy, Culver said Monday at a meeting hosted by the Greater Des Moines Partnership, a regional economic development group.

“We want to start making incremental progress right now,” Culver said. “I think if we can shift the focus of immigration to jobs and economic development, we’ll have a better chance for some common-sense reforms.”

About 50 community members were told the task force, formed in December, plans to release a final report to political leaders after this fall’s elections, with hopes of Congress taking up legislation early next year.

The Des Moines meeting was part of a listening tour that includes stops this month in seven cities across the Midwest.

The need for immigrants in a stagnant economy is clear, said Tamar Jacoby, who will author the final report based on the task force’s recommendations. Midwestern health care, science and agriculture industries rely on foreign-born doctors and nurses, researchers and low-skilled workers, she said.

Manufacturers have not been able to fill high-skill job openings despite high unemployment; the country is not producing enough people with college degrees; and the fastest-growing jobs in the U.S. — home health care and personal aides — will need more workers than the country can produce, she said.

“I’m sure you’ve heard people complain immigrants steal jobs from Americans,” Jacoby said. “The exact opposite is true. Immigrants create jobs, they enhance American productivity and they help businesses stay healthy and competitive.”

The task force said it would make broad policy recommendations and let Congress decide which ones to tackle first.

The wish list includes more visas for skilled workers and entrepreneurs; more temporary visas for seasonal unskilled workers; a system that ensures employers hire legal foreign workers; better border security; and a path to citizenship for children brought to the country illegally and for those illegal immigrants already here who are performing critical jobs for society.

A panel of local business leaders also spoke of struggling to navigate a broken immigration system.

Julie Sorci, vice president for human resources at Compressor Controls Corp. in Des Moines, said her company hires many foreign graduates from Iowa State University who can live in limbo for a decade while they wait for a green card. When they return after a visit to their home country, their families are regularly held up at the border, she said.

“Immigration is a critical part of our business growth,” she said.

<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/article/20120821/NEWS/308210046/-1/MARKETPLACE/Shift-sought-immigration>