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Immigration is strengthening our nation's economy

By Rep. Charles Gonzalez (D-Texas)

Just about anybody will tell you the reason why we have such a massive influx of immigrants is an age-old economic principle: supply and demand. Our nation's economy and its progress are directly linked to how we address the fundamental issue of our immigration policies. The reality of the situation is that we're dealing with many complexities of a broken immigration system, which requires a comprehensive approach.

As a member of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security and International Law, I recently had the honor of discussing the issue of the "Role of Immigration in Strengthening America's Economy" with experts and leaders on this topic, including media mogul Rupert Murdoch, New York City Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, Steven Camarota, Director of Research at the Center for Immigration Studies, and Jeff Moseley, President of the Greater Houston Partnership. The debate was centered on one simple fact: immigrants are vital to our economy.

Our current broken system that posts "Keep Out" signs along our borders while allowing U.S. employers to hold "Help Wanted" signs creates an imbalance in the way we deal with immigration policy. Most of today's debate on the issue is focused on the undocumented workers when the same level of scrutiny should be put on those businesses that employ them. We must enforce the laws of our land and hold the employers who break them responsible. And as a nation of laws, it is unfair to those businesses that operate legitimately, those who do not employ unauthorized workers. These same businesses are forced to compete in a market with other businesses that hire cheaper undocumented laborers. We must level the playing field to create a thriving and prosperous economy for all American businesses by ensuring that everyone abides by the same rules.

On the flip side of this debate, and as supported by our distinguished panel of witnesses at the hearing, we cannot fix our immigration policy by showing approximately 12 million people the door. When I asked Dr. Camarota from the Center for Immigration Studies how he would suggest we remove the 12 million undocumented immigrants, he argued that by increasing interior enforcement, the lives of undocumented immigrants would become so unbearable that they would ultimately self-deport and leave on their own volition.

However, contrary to some critics, the U.S. has increased enforcement. According to the Center for American Progress, removals have nearly doubled since fiscal year 2005. Additionally, the Obama administration has audited and fined more employers who hire undocumented labor, and despite concerns of racial profiling and other abuses, the Department of Homeland Security has continued to enlist local law enforcement to enforce federal immigration laws through the 287(g) and Secure Communities programs. For those undocumented immigrants who have lived in this country for years, it seems highly unlikely they would self-deport, especially if they have spouses and children who are U.S. citizens. And, as Mr. Murdoch pointed out, it would cost \$285 billion to deport all of them; the idea that we do nothing except pursue enforcement-only remedies is "not only...impractical, it is cost prohibitive."

Notwithstanding our current economic state, surely there are better ways to spend that kind of money. Mayor Bloomberg asserted "...creating a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants will strengthen our economy." These are the workers that labor in the fields to pick our fruits and vegetables and work as custodians while everyone else is sleeping, along with other low-wage jobs that Americans won't fill. They are engrained into our economic cycle as much as a highly-paid executive. We must find a way to fully and legally integrate them into our workforce.

No matter where one stands on this issue, we can all agree that the current system is broken. We must also recognize that it not good for business. A comprehensive solution must take into consideration the fact that immigrants have intrinsically contributed to our economy, not only as laborers but also as business owners. That directly translates into paid taxes, jobs created, and economic growth in every industry. Even during better economic times, it would not be in our nation's best interest to deny a comprehensive immigration solution.

It's now time for action, but we must change the tone of this debate. Our economy's future prosperity depends on it. I call on business leaders from every industry to participate in this dialogue with an honest and rational mindset. The American entrepreneurial spirit has endured many changes and obstacles, and we are again at a crossroads. Let's make the right decision and reform our current immigration system.

