



**September 5, 2013**

**Subject:** The Record - NJ small biz groups back immigration reform

**NJ small biz groups back immigration reform**

By Hugh Morley

A group of New Jersey small business advocacy organizations voiced their support Wednesday for reforms to U.S. immigration laws that would give legal status to millions of undocumented workers, saying the reforms would create jobs and benefit businesses and the economy.

The nine business and religious organizations, including representatives of the Morris County Chamber of Commerce, MIDJersey Chamber of Commerce and New Jersey Main Street Alliance, said in a phone conference that were speaking out as part of an ongoing effort to be heard in the immigration debate.

To date, the business perspective on immigration has been provided much more strongly by corporations seeking reforms that would make it easier for them to bring skilled foreign workers into the U.S., mostly under the H-1B visa program.

Speakers during the phone conference said nearly a third of all businesses in New Jersey are owned by immigrants, and studies have shown the reforms will create 7,200 jobs a year and over \$50 billion in gross state product over 10 years.

"It's about economics," said Bob Prunetti, president & CEO of Mercerville-based MIDJersey Chamber of Commerce. "It's about the economics of our nation, of our state, and particularly economics here and in Central New Jersey."

That area of the state contains numerous pharmaceutical, bio-tech, hi-tech and financial services firms that rely on being able to hire top-flight talent from abroad to be competitive, he said.

Paul Boudreau, president of the Morris County Chamber of Commerce, said some of his organization's 850 member companies are frustrated over the cumbersome process of hiring foreign workers and the difficulty of finding certain skill sets. In addition, he said, there is "generally a frustration that they see with people that we educate in this country and then send back home to compete with us."

"Obviously, [it's] a system that in our view is very much broken," said Boudreau, adding that "as a country we have made a decision that we are not going to deport these 11 million [undocumented]

people that we keep hearing about. And if we are not going to do that .... we need to fix this problem of their status in our country."

Representatives of the nine organizations on the call, among them the Hispanic American Chamber of Commerce of Essex County and the Morris County Hispanic American Chamber of Commerce, said they broadly back the Senate immigration bill passed in June, although they expect the House of Representatives to offer significantly different legislation.

The Senate bill proposes providing a 13-year long pathway to legalization for undocumented immigrants, increasing the number of visas for high skilled workers, creating a new visa program for low-skilled workers on America's farms and strengthening security on the nation's borders.

The state's largest business advocacy groups were not on the call. The New Jersey State Chamber of Commerce said it backs most elements of the Senate reform bill but has reservations about a section that would raise fees on a summer work visa program that brings temporary workers to the U.S. for the tourism and other industries.

Phil Kirschner, president of New Jersey Business and Industry Association, said his organization backs some elements of the Senate bill, such as the proposal to provide more visas for skilled and low-end farm workers.

A speaker on the conference call, J. Kelly Conklin, president of Foley-Waite Associates Inc., a high-end "architectural woodworking" company from Bloomfield, said immigrants - mostly skilled carpenters - are key to his business.

Most of his 15 employees were immigrants, and are now citizens, he said, adding that the importance of immigration reform can be seen in his company's efforts to find new workers to expand as more work arrives.

"The numbers of qualified folks who have applied for work with us have been pretty slim, and pretty slim in terms of their skills," he said.

In addition, companies that hire legal workers face a competitive disadvantage in a market where rivals hire low-paid, undocumented workers.

"I can't afford to buy new equipment if I am competing with a guy down the street who is paying six or seven dollars an hour, when I'm paying 25 to 35 dollars an hour," Conklin said.