

## **WHY DOES THE CHURCH SUPPORT A GUEST WORKER PROGRAM? By Martina Keller\***

Lower skilled workers employed in all sectors of our economy are often called “essential workers.” Such jobs include restaurant workers, retail clerks, construction trade workers, manufacturing line workers, hotel service workers, food production workers, landscape workers, and health care aids. Often immigrants work in these jobs that many Americans do not choose, but are “essential” to keep our economy and our country growing. In the continuing series of articles focused on immigration reform, this piece explores the issues surrounding the creation of a guest worker program in the United States and why the U.S. Catholic Bishops support such a measure.

**Aren't there enough U.S. workers for these jobs?** The answer is actually no. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that the U.S. will create 18.9 million new jobs by 2014. During this period, employment growth will be concentrated in the service-producing sector, with health services, leisure and hospitality, transportation and warehousing among the fastest growing sectors. Despite the fact that employers in these industries have led the way in welfare-to-work programs and other initiatives that have been successful in reducing welfare rolls and providing jobs for graduates, these efforts still are insufficient. Employers are raising wages and offering improved benefits. The growth of these industries have led to lower skilled occupations having the highest projected growth rate. Of the top 10 occupations projected by the Department of Labor to have the largest projected job growth through 2014, 7 are considered lower skilled. Much of the demand for these occupations is related to the growing healthcare and service needs of the aging “baby boomer” population.

In contrast to these statistics of economic growth, however, the U.S. is not producing enough new workers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that as the “baby boomers” retire, growth in the work force over the next decade will be 2.5% slower than in the last decade. Barring unforeseen increases in immigration and/or participation rates among the elderly, there will be a reduction in the total size of the nation’s workforce. (Source: <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.nr0.htm>)

**Isn't there already a visa category for essential workers that these employers can use?** The answer is yes and no. There are several temporary work visa categories in the current immigration law that allow foreign nationals to live and work in the U.S. for a period of time, but each category is specifically defined to meet very narrow criteria. One such category intended for lower skilled essential workers is a temporary visa program that is useful only for employers who can establish that their need for foreign workers is temporary (seasonal, a one-time occurrence, or a peak load or intermittent need). If the employer’s need is year-round or does not fall into one of the definitions used by the Department of Labor or Immigration Service, the employer cannot use that visa category to fill labor needs. A temporary visa category does not exist for employers who have permanent or long-term jobs, such as in the health care, retail, hospitality and other industries. Even for employers with truly temporary needs, the current temporary visa application process is burdened with bureaucratic red tape that makes it extremely time-consuming and difficult to use.

The permanent immigrant category for lower skilled occupations that requires less than two years of experience is virtually useless. Only 5,000 visas are available annually. The demand for these visas far exceeds the available number, which in turn has created a backlog. Right now, employers must wait more than five years for a visa number to become available in this category. As a result, employers often are forced to outsource their work overseas or close their doors.

**Is immigration a tool that can help strengthen our economy?** Alan Greenspan, former Chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank, and other economic experts think so. While Chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank, Mr. Greenspan called upon Congress to reexamine our immigration policies as a means of maintaining a strong economy. In Congressional testimony, Mr. Greenspan demonstrated the link between alleviating inflationary pressures caused by a tight labor market and stated that tight labor markets could be the greatest threat to our economy, as they promote inflation. He stated that Congress should look at the contributions that immigrant workers make to help reduce the chance of inflation and help our economy.  
(<http://www.federalreserve.gov/boarddocs/hh/2003/february/testimony.htm>)

**Are there disadvantages to a guest worker program?** Yes, there can be. As other countries like Germany and France have learned, guest worker programs can create a disenfranchised “underclass” within society. When such programs are set up with the exclusive needs of employers in mind, guest workers can be vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination. Some guest worker programs may lead to increased numbers of undocumented workers, as many workers choose to stay in the host nation permanently. As our own current immigration laws have shown, temporary worker programs with too narrowly defined eligibility criteria may do nothing to slow increases in undocumented immigrants. For these reasons, the U.S. Catholic Bishops strongly encourage comprehensive immigration reform that *includes* a viable and just temporary worker program, which protects both U.S. and foreign workers and which includes an option to petition for permanent residency. That way, those temporary workers who choose to stay in the U.S. can do so legitimately with the interest of transitioning into fully participating U.S. citizens.

**What needs to be done?** The U.S. Congress needs to pass bipartisan comprehensive immigration reform legislation that would match willing workers with willing employers. Several times since 2004, President Bush has spoken emphatically about the need to reform our immigration laws and articulated several principles to guide such reform. In particular, he has stated that the U.S. needs a regulated, workable immigration system that allows foreign nationals to work here when there is evidence of a shortage of available U.S. workers, that allows those individuals already here and working to obtain legal status and work authorization and reduces the backlogs allowing the families of workers in the U.S. to reunite. Such initiatives must receive adequate funding in order to succeed and reduce the long visa processing backlogs that make current programs difficult to use. A bill addressing each of these needs was passed in the U.S. Senate in May 2006 (S. 2611), but current leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives vowed to block any efforts towards comprehensive reform legislation that included any benefit to the undocumented. The U.S. Catholic bishops applauded passage of the Senate bill as an important first step in immigration reform, but continue to urge the U.S. House of Representatives And Senate to work together. (<http://www.nccbuscc.org/comm/archives/2006/06-107.shtml>)

**More discussion on the immigration debate and why the Church is involved will follow in the coming weeks. For more detailed information see [www.justiceforimmigrants.org](http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org).** \*  
*Martina Keller, a parishioner of Queen of All Saints, is an attorney in private practice and a pro bono advisor to the Catholic Campaign on Immigration Reform for the Archdiocese of Chicago.*



**THE CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR IMMIGRATION REFORM**