

September 24, 2012

Member of Congress
Congressional Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Member of Congress:

In this election year, many economic issues compete for attention, including the need for comprehensive immigration reform. The United States needs to update and rationalize our immigration laws to realistically address the fundamental role that immigrants play in the nation's economy. Recognizing that comprehensive immigration reform is unlikely before the end of this session of Congress, the New England Council does believe that there are several updates to the nation's immigration laws that are fairly straightforward, can be addressed on a bipartisan basis and will have a direct impact on the economic environment of New England. These include changes to several visa categories that provide workers who directly drive the knowledge-based, services and seasonal businesses of the New England region.

For a number of years, the New England Council has advocated increasing the limits on H-1B and H-2B visas. The H-1B visa program allows employers to supplement their current workforce with highly skilled foreign workers. The visa must be used for staff in specialty occupations -- those occupations requiring a great deal of specialized knowledge along with at least a bachelor's degree or its equivalent. Additionally, certain businesses across the country, particularly those associated with summer and winter resorts, have traditionally relied on foreign workers to supplement the regular staff during their busiest months. The H-2B working visa allows foreign nationals to enter into the United States temporarily to engage in nonagricultural employment that is seasonal in nature. The demand for workers under the H-1B and H-2B visa programs continues to grow. Yet, the limit on the number of visas issued in both programs is quickly reached each year, leaving employers unable to fill certain types of positions for which they cannot find candidates in the domestic workforce.

In particular, technology companies and other knowledge-based employers often find the development of key programs hampered by the lack of workers with science, technology, engineering and math backgrounds, the so-called "STEM" skills. While raising the cap on the H-1B visa program would help address the need for highly skilled workers on the part of New England employers, other steps can also be taken.

The New England Council is encouraged that the House last week considered legislation, the STEM Jobs Act (H.R. 6429), which would have increased the number of permanent resident “green cards” available to foreign-born graduates with advanced STEM degrees. Providing green cards for the top foreign graduates of U.S. universities with doctoral and master degrees in the STEM fields offers knowledge-based employers a way to address the skills gap they currently face in trying to find qualified employees. It also encourages foreign graduates to apply their skills in helping U.S. companies compete in the global economy, rather than sending U.S.-trained workers with those skills to employers in other countries. While the STEM Jobs Act failed to garner enough support, the New England Council believes its consideration signals an appreciation of the importance of this issue, and urges Congress to consider other pending legislation that addresses ways to retain foreign-born STEM graduates as economic assets in the United States.

Make no mistake: the global competition for workers with advanced STEM skills is fierce, and as the nation and the New England region continue to work toward full economic recovery, it is important to take advantage of opportunities that can facilitate the availability of the workers needed to achieve that recovery. Adding tens of thousands of highly-skilled individuals to the workforce can only strengthen the region’s economic position.

It is clear that the nation’s current immigration framework does not fully recognize the role of immigrants in the U.S. economy. While agreement on comprehensive immigration reform may seem elusive in the current political climate, Congress can take steps to address current skills gaps and worker shortages by raising the H-1B and H-2B visa caps and providing a path toward resident green cards for STEM graduates. The New England Council encourages action on all three areas before the close of this session of the 112th Congress.

Sincerely,



Michele M. Jalbert
Executive Director – Policy & Strategy