

The Arizona Republic

Friday, January 19, 2001

CHANGE IMMIGRATION LAW By SUSAN BITTER SMITH

The recent challenge U.S. Labor secretary nominee Linda Chavez faced when attention focused on her assistance to an illegal resident of the United States continues to raise the question of how we address the growing number of unlawful residents in our country.

This problem has particular impact to residents of the Valley, because our Arizona border continues to be an attractive destination for desperate foreigners.

As a candidate for Congress, I heard many stories of desperation from separated families whose breadwinners crossed the Arizona border without authorization to earn badly needed dollars to be shipped back home. Every day, husbands leave their wives and children, sons and daughters leave the safety of their families, and mothers leave their children to the care of others to come to the strong job market in the Phoenix area.

Arizona has become a prime target because of its proximity to the Mexican border and increasing border protections along the California, Texas and New Mexico borders. Federal funds have increased fencing, patrol officers and border lighting in these states. Arizona is still trying to catch up.

Ask any Valley hotelier, restaurant owner or agribusiness owner, and they will tell you that they rely on this influx of determined workers to fill the shortages in their personnel needs. In this flush economy, many of the less desirable jobs that keep the Valley's hospitality, agricultural and construction businesses moving depend on undocumented workers who are desperate for dollars.

Yet, as Chavez found out, aiding and certainly employing illegal immigrants may not only cause you problems, it could lead you into a courtroom facing Immigration and Naturalization Service violations. Without a change in federal immigration policy, many of the Valley's favorite restaurants, popular hotels and pending construction projects could find themselves out of business because of a lack of available labor.

Not every person who crosses our unprotected borders is going to be an asset to society, so clearly we can't ignore the need to catch up with our neighboring states on border protection. However, more than lip service has to happen in Washington to create an opportunity for willing workers to legally fill unfilled jobs.

As recently as last month, Congress came close but failed to create a mechanism to allow legal immigrant workers to enter the country on a temporary or seasonal basis. Despite the best efforts of the agricultural industry, and in spite of November election talk of bipartisan cooperation, the lame-duck Congress and White House could not agree on important immigration reforms.

Apparently disagreement erupted over some of the amnesty provisions for workers who were already in this country illegally and the proposed qualifications for a "guest worker" program.

The failed proposal would have qualified roughly 1 million workers to be apart of a guest worker program, providing them temporary visas to allow them to work.

Leaders in the Arizona congressional delegation know that the next Congress is going to have to tackle this issue. Arizona's governor will certainly continue to remind them. Chavez's problem brings some press attention to the matter, even to those residents of our country who don't live in border states like ours.

City leaders in Mesa and Chandler are attempting to provide programs for day workers in their communities, but without immigration reforms, these programs face challenges and can't address the real needs of undocumented workers.

Since INS now identifies Arizona as the leading destination for illegal foreign workers in the Southwest, our voices must be loud. Full immigration reform, both for skilled and unskilled workers, cannot continue to be elusive in the Congress.