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In practicing immigration law, I've found that in our society there are several misconceptions related to immigration and the immigrant population. In a series of upcoming columns, I'll address some myths.

Myth 1: Immigrants take jobs away from Americans.

Fact: Economic studies show that immigrants actually increase economic productivity and the wages of American workers.

The most common immigration myth I hear is that immigrants are taking all of "our" jobs. In reality, studies support the proposition that immigrants, whether here legally or illegally, not only don't take jobs from native-born citizens, they actually create jobs and increase the economic output and salaries of American workers. One of the major findings in a 2007 report by the White House Council of Economic Advisors (CEA) to the Executive Office of the President was that, on average, U.S. natives benefit from immigration because immigrants tend to complement U.S. natives and do not substitute for them in the workplace.

Foreign-born workers fill gaps left by native-born workers both in high-skilled and low-skilled jobs—jobs necessary for the effective continuation of the present level of U.S. economy and society. A March 2008 National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP) report showed that for every H-1B visa (non-immigrant visa that allows U.S. employers to temporarily employ foreign workers in specialty occupations) requested by an S&P 500 U.S. technology company, overall employment at the company increased by five workers. The NFAP report also found that among the study-sample companies experiencing layoffs, for every H-1B position requested, total employment was estimated to be two workers more than it otherwise would have been. A report released this month by the Technology Policy Institute noted that highly skilled immigrant workers, admitted to the U.S. on H-1B and other visas, benefit the federal budget by paying more in taxes than less skilled workers. In addition, the Technology Policy Institute study found that these types of highly skilled immigrant workers are not likely to receive federal benefits, particularly in the near term.

In its comprehensive report published in 1997, the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences concluded that on average, an immigrant and his or her children generate public revenue that exceeds their public costs over time—approximately $80,000 more in taxes than they receive in state, federal and local benefits during their lifetimes. According to the 2007 CEA report, the predictions made by the NRC a decade earlier were accurate. The CEA report stated that, "the long-run impact of immigration on public budgets is likely to be positive."

When immigrants fill lower-skilled, labor-intensive positions, their hard work and lower pay allows higher-skilled U.S. workers to increase productivity and thus increase their incomes. Also, as the native-born U.S. population becomes better educated, young immigrant workers fill gaps in the low-skilled labor markets. Native-born workers are then able to specialize in their profession of choice. This process is exemplified by typical poultry packaging corporations. At most poultry producing companies, the owners, managers and board of directors are able to attend to corporate business because they can hire lower-paid, often immigrant, workers to process, clean and package the product. As has been noted repeatedly by other authors, there are few U.S. workers who are willing to accept these types of low-paying positions and difficult working conditions.

The CEA concluded "immigrants not only help fuel the Nation's economic growth, but also have an overall positive effect on the American economy as a whole and on the income of native-born American workers." According to the CEA, approximately 90 percent of U.S.-born workers experienced an increase in wages due to immigration.

In its 1997 report, the NRC estimated that the annual wage gain due to immigration for U.S. workers was $10 billion each year. In 2007, the CEA estimated the gain at over $30 billion per year.

In addition to having an overall positive affect on the average wages of U.S. workers, an increase in immigrant workers also increases employment rates among native-born U.S. workers. According to a study based on U.S. Census Bureau data at the state level performed by the non-partisan research group Pew Hispanic Center, between 2000 and 2004 "there was a positive correlation between the increase in the foreign-born population and the employment of native-born workers in 27 states and the District of Columbia."

For example, the Public Policy Institute of California reported that California saw an increase in wages of U.S. natives by about four percent from 1990 to 2004—a period of large influx of immigrants to the state—due to the complementary skills of immigrant workers and an increase in the demand for tasks performed by native workers.

Studies performed earlier in the decade by the Brookings Institution have shown that immigrant entrepreneurs and business owners create additional jobs in the U.S. economy for U.S. citizens as well as other immigrant workers.

The myth that all of "our" jobs are being taken away by immigrant workers is simply not based in fact and should be abandoned. Immigrants play a vital role in our local and national economy, in good times and in bad. Whatever your position with respect to immigration policies or enforcement, it's important to recognize the valuable marketplace contributions being made by immigrants in Prince William County.

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