

Essential Workers Protected Us, We Should Protect Them

**Nathan Kasai**

Former Deputy Director of Social Policy & Politics

 [@Nathan_Kasai](https://twitter.com/Nathan_Kasai)

America has long relied on immigrants to fill essential jobs. Even before COVID-19 changed our lives, workers from across the globe were critical to keeping food on our tables, getting us where we need to go, and keeping us healthy and cared for. Now as America thankfully rounds the corner on this pandemic, we should be standing side by side with those who helped us weather the past year. Here's why providing permanent legal immigration status to essential workers who don't yet have it makes sense for our country.

It Retains the Workforce We Need

Providing legal status to essential immigrant workers isn't just the morally right thing to do. It's the right thing for our businesses and employers. Much of the debate around protecting essential workers focuses on undocumented communities, and rightly so, as they make up substantial

portions of essential labor. But it shouldn't be lost on policymakers that America continuously relies

portions of essential labor. But it shouldn't be lost on policymakers that America continuously relies on temporary guestworkers to fill many essential jobs. Roughly one in three healthcare workers is an immigrant, and the same goes for farmworkers.¹

These workers are exactly who our immigration system should be looking to retain permanently; hardworking people who stepped up to help a country in crisis. Yet because many are here on guest visas, it is difficult or impossible for them to transition to permanent legal visas. From H-1B visa-holders in nursing jobs to H1-A seasonal agricultural workers, there are thousands of guestworkers who have proven themselves invaluable not just in meeting labor shortages, but in providing essential services to Americans during trying times. These are critical jobs that employers have long struggled to fill. States across the country were already facing growing shortages of qualified nurses, and the pandemic only made things worse.² Similarly, the demand for seasonal agricultural workers has grown year over year, with over 200,000 guest visas issued in 2019.³ As our economy continues to reopen from the pandemic, retaining the immigrant workers who proved their necessity is the right thing for our employers, our communities, and the country more broadly.

Undocumented and Temporary Workers Stepped Up

Our immigration system has been broken for decades. It's clear to everyone. That's why, despite years of inaction on immigration and four years of an abhorrently draconian anti-immigrant Administration, Americans remain supportive of finding a humane and fair long-term solution for undocumented populations. And after we relied on millions of undocumented immigrants in essential jobs and industries across the country this past difficult year, it's easy to understand why. Long before the pandemic, undocumented immigrants were necessary to keep America fed, healthy, and prosperous. When the pandemic hit last year, these communities didn't abandon the country or their jobs. Instead, an estimated five million immigrant workers supported our businesses and communities throughout the pandemic, with almost one million being Dreamers.⁴ Those same estimates show that roughly two in three undocumented workers is an essential worker.⁵

Much like guestworkers, retaining undocumented essential workers only makes sense. These are hardworking, productive members of our communities. And many are Dreamers, who have known no other home than America. Protecting them is not just the right thing to do based on how much they contributed to this country over the past year. It's clear that our country needs them to ensure we all can thrive moving forward.

And like almost every immigration solution being seriously considered at the federal level, there are clear safeguards included in the legislation that has been proposed to prevent the very rare cases of workers who may raise national security or public safety concerns. Anyone who would receive legal

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status would be required to clear a background check, similar to those proposed in legislation to protect Dreamers or in the White House's *U.S. Citizenship Act* proposal. ⁶

Americans Agree with Protecting Essential Workers

Immigration can often seem perilously divisive, but there are clear areas where the solutions are neither complicated, nor polarizing. When asked specifically about undocumented essential workers, two-thirds of voters said they supported creating an earned pathway to citizenship for these folks, including 50% of Republican voters. ⁷

And 72% agree Dreamers should be protected, including 55% of Republicans. ⁸ And since we know a significant portion of essentials workers are Dreamers, it's clear there is strong support for retaining and protecting the immigrant workers who protected us.

Conclusion

Debates around immigration are often framed just around what is at stake for immigrant communities. But if the past year has proven anything, it's that America clearly relies upon both documented and undocumented immigrants to meet our everyday security, economic, and healthcare needs. There are no losers in providing permanent immigration status to essential workers. This should be an easy win not just for our immigrant communities, but for America. They've clearly proven themselves to be essential in every sense of the word.

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ENDNOTES

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