

OUR OPINION

Fix US programs for guest workers

THE ISSUE

Businesses are on the offensive against efforts to punish those caught hiring illegal aliens.

CRITICIZED for hiring illegal aliens, businesses are taking the offensive in the battle over immigration reform to call for expansion and improvement of programs allowing them to hire legal immigrant workers. The programs now are dysfunctional and in need of congressional action.

Federal immigration agents made nearly 5,000 arrests in workplaces last year in response to a public demand for a crackdown. However, many employers are desperate for low-wage workers while the Social Security Administration database cannot be relied upon to confirm that a person is illegal to hire.

Meanwhile, guest worker programs have caps that limit the number of foreigners who can be temporarily employed in America. For example, the 85,000 lid for temporary work visas for high-tech employees was reached on the first day for applications to be submitted.

The program for seasonal workers at nonagricultural businesses such as resorts, restaurants and landscaping companies has a cap of 66,000, but exemptions have allowed that total to exceed 120,000. Another program for nonimmigrants to work at seasonal jobs on farms or ranches has no cap but draws few takers because it is cumbersome and expensive.

The Bush administration has taken the stance that voters will not favor expanding or improving temporary work programs unless the government continues to crack down on employers. "We are not going to be able to satisfy the American people on a legal temporary worker program until they are convinced that we will have a stick as well as a carrot," said Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff.

Congress needs to step in and approve legislation similar to the immigration-reform package that was rejected last year.