

Tuesday, November 6, 2007

Guest-worker bill should live on

Here's the modus operandi of Congress these days:

Find a program that works. Build bipartisan support for extending it. Do something to mess it up so that nothing gets done.

That's what's happened with the hugely popular SCHIP children's insurance program, and it's what also seems to be happening with the H2B guest-worker program that could leave the hospitality industry in Branson in a lurch.

The H2B program offers businesses the opportunity to hire temporary foreign workers who are tracked by the government and must return to their home nations for a period of time in between seasonal work opportunities. It's supported by Democrats and Republicans.

Congressman Roy Blunt of Springfield calls it the "ultimate temporary worker program."

So what's the problem?

The law expired Sept. 30, and if Congress doesn't extend it, a whole lot of businesses in Branson and elsewhere will be left without employees. And the temptation will be there for both the employers and the foreign workers to break the law.

And that's precisely what is wrong with the debate over illegal immigration in this nation.

There are those who want a comprehensive solution to deal with all the issues at the same time: the border, the guest workers and temporary programs such as H2B. And there are those who want to deal with illegal immigration piecemeal, one issue at a time.

In the meantime, programs that work are held hostage by lawmakers trying to make political points. So by Congress' inaction, it will create a self-fulfilling prophecy: Kill the working H2B program and the illegal immigration problem gets worse.

We share the frustration of those members of Congress who want to see complete reform passed all at once, but it's simply not going to happen. That political reality should not get in the way of a program that works and has bipartisan support.

Congress should do the right thing and quickly pass a simple extension of the H2B program.