



Immigration plan would increase work visas

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Senate immigration plan would increase the number of temporary work permits given out for high-skilled jobs.



(Photo: Mark Ralston, AFP/Getty Images)

Story Highlights

- Number of skilled workers who can come to U.S. capped at 65K
- Senate plan would increase H1B visa numbers
- Some see work visas as possible problem for foreign nations

DUBLIN — Legal assistant Angel Strickland Fahy and her husband are rooting for one aspect of an immigration plan put forward Monday by eight U.S. senators: an increase in work visas for foreigners with skills U.S. businesses want.

"It's extremely difficult to get a visa for the USA," said Fahy, 28, whose husband is applying for a so-called L1 visa that permits a foreigner to work for his company's branch in the United States.

"I have no problem with immigration restrictions; I understand that countries have to control their borders," she says. "But the procedure is very long and expensive."

A proposal by a bipartisan group of eight senators aims to offer a pathway to citizenship for the estimated 11 million foreigners who are in the U.S. illegally. It also would increase the number of temporary work permits given out for high-skilled jobs (H1B visa) and provide permanent residency to people who earn advanced degrees in science, technology or math at U.S. universities.

Sanwar Ali, director of Workpermit.com based in the United Kingdom, says that there are many more Indians wanting H1B visas than there are visas. The number for skilled workers is currently capped at 65,000 annually.

He says the cap has been a boon to Indians and has hobbled some information technology companies in the USA from getting all the help they need.

"The visa has been useful for Indians," he says. "But there are not enough – this has been a problem for years."

Ali, whose firm advises people of immigration issues, says in the past increases to the H1B visa had often been offset with decreases in the number of other types of visas issued, such as the co-called Green Card lottery that awards residency to lucky winners, or the L-1 visas for intracompany transfers.

"It doesn't make sense," he adds.

Sam Underwood, 25, a British actor, first moved to New York six years ago to study acting and managed to switch from a student visa to an O-1 visa that is aimed at foreigners in the "creative" fields. He was eventually granted permanent residency.

Underwood runs a theater company that specializes in collaborating with international artists. He says it cost him \$7,000 to get his visa and he may not have gotten it without recommendations from actors Alec Baldwin and Kevin Spacey.

"It's mostly a struggle to prove you're not there to live off the state or screw up the economy, which doesn't even really even happen here the way it does in the U.K.," he says.

"Performance arts are a huge addition to the U.S. economy," Underwood says. "Creative people should be allowed to contribute to the cultural wealth existing in this country."

Fahy says applying for the L-1 visa costs in excess of \$13,000, a cost usually handled by the applicant's company.

"Once you've got a job, the next hurdle is to convince the U.S. government that no American can do the job and that you are not taking the job from an American citizen," she says.

But some see an increase in work visas as a potential problem for foreign nations.

"It could be a double-edged sword," says Dina El-Mofty, executive director of Injaz Egypt, an organization that prepares youths for employment and encourages them to succeed in the private sector.

"It's a great opportunity for young people to find work and jobs abroad and gain experience, but it could also result in a brain drain of the country in which bright, young graduates will start leaving," El-Mofty says.

Federico Estévez, political science professor at the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico and a Stanford University graduate, says the proposal will open up opportunities for Mexicans.

Estévez cites his own daughter, who studied at a top Mexican medical school but took additional training in the United States and now works as a pediatrician in San Francisco.

He says Mexico has long been dealing with a "brain drain" because of better pay and jobs for highly skilled folks elsewhere. He did not think that expanding skilled worker visas will have much of an impact since many Mexican professionals have found "creative" ways off obtaining work papers.

A 2011 study by Mexico City bank BBVA Bancomer estimated that about 20% of the approximately 80,000 Mexicans with doctoral degrees live in the United States.

Economist Juan Luis Ordaz points out that it is economic growth and not visa allotments that drives Mexican emigration to the United States. If the U.S. economy expands, the demand for more Mexican labor will also increase – for both those with skills and without, legal and illegal.

"Demand drives Mexican migration," Ordaz says. "When the U.S. economy grows, more Mexicans move."

The overwhelming majority of Mexicans who have entered the United State illegally are unskilled labor with fewer opportunities for work at home. The overall number of Mexicans heading north has tumbled over the past year due to the lagging U.S. jobs picture and decent economic growth in Mexico, according to Mexico immigration officials.

Ellen Calmus, an American in Malinalco southwest of Mexico City, works with the families of Mexicans living illegally in the United States. She says many are taking a wait-and-see approach about slipping into the country because it is harder to get to the U.S. border and cross, and jobs are not as plentiful.

In the past coming and going – especially for the holidays – was common, but now, "We have kids (in Malinalco) who haven't seen a parent in years," she says.

Calmus expressed hope that some sort of provision could be made for workers with less-technical skills to work in the United States.

"I hear a lot of stories from employers about workers," sent back here, she says. "These are appreciated workers and individuals, even if they're not rocket scientists."

Consultant Erik Ramirez-Ruiz, who has worked in the United States, sees the "brain drain" differently.

"We live in a globalized world so Mexico doesn't lose trained people when they take advantage of labor opportunities abroad," says Ramirez-Ruiz, who co-founded an education non-profit, Teach for Mexico. "Having more H1B visas can help Mexican talent reach its potential, given the opportunities available in the U.S."

Contributing: Sarah Lynch in Cairo; and Jennifer Collins in Berlin; Agren reported from Mexico City; Bhatti from Berlin, Dumalaon from Dublin.

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