

## Immigration in Montana: State's aging work force would benefit from sensibly enforced federal regulations

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By *LYNDA MOSS*

Stories of immigrants and newcomers echo across our state. Spoken in Italian, German or Spanish, these stories tell about their contributions. Visit any local history museum and you will find photographs of Norwegian homestead families, Irish miners or Chinese railroad workers building homes, industries and communities. Montana stories also reflect immigration policies, like the 1920s bracero or "strong arm" worker program created by the U.S. and Mexican governments that brought more than 3,000 migrant workers into the Yellowstone Valley.

We are a nation of immigrants, and at the national level immigration reform is in gridlock. Candidates offer diverse solutions, state legislatures struggle to respond to lack of adequate immigration enforcement by the federal government. Legal immigrants as well as undocumented workers are being blamed for displacing U.S. workers and driving down wages.

Conflicting reports on the economic and social effects of immigration flood the media. Leaders question how immigration policies affect work force and business growth, how borders need to be secure, yet allow innovation and talent to flow.

For generations, immigration and its relationship to international policies and market expansions have pushed and pulled people across U.S. and Montana borders. Like most Americans, we see immigrants as hardworking and family oriented people trying to be good citizens. We see how immigrants have added to our diversity of food and music and help us learn about cultures and the world. Folk art and traditions such as Norwegian Hardanger embroidery, Cornish pasties, Irish ballads, Cinco de Mayo festivals and even cowboy poetry express Montana's complex and rich history.

In a few years, Montana will have one of the oldest populations in the country and the potential for a work force crisis that is hard to imagine. While Montana is not yet experiencing large increases of foreign-born workers like other states, we have an opportunity to have immigration policies that make sense.

At the same time, we must address the negative undertones of immigration discussions. As an example, 50 years ago Mexican-American children living in La Colonia on Billings' South Side experienced signs in local businesses that read "No Mexicans or dogs allowed." Today, we have efforts such as Not in Our Town, where Billings citizens stood together show racism and discrimination have no place in our communities.

Immigration is a federal responsibility. Local and state government law enforcement agents do not

have the financial resources and, most important, the training to enforce complex immigration law. Foreign policy, maintenance of uniform rules of commerce, acquiring U.S. citizenship, respect for treaties, reciprocity for U.S. citizens abroad and defense in the times of war are explicitly federal responsibilities. Employers are required to fill out the federal Form I-9, employment eligibility verification. While we need to ensure employment requirements are met, policies should support workplace fairness for all workers, including documented immigrants.

We must also understand who are the immigrants coming to Montana today. The National Immigration Center research identifies 10 percent of the foreign-born people in Montana as representing Hispanic or Latino origins. The center's research in 2005 also indicates that the largest percentages of recent immigrants came from Canada, Germany and China. Providing education for those new immigrants and, if needed, programs for those who may be English language learners will help build the quality work force Montana communities need. Most important, state work force strategies must provide opportunities for all workers to upgrade their skills so we can remain competitive in the global marketplace.

Almost everyone in Montana came from someplace else. We have an opportunity to transcend the political rhetoric of immigration and create realistic policies that acknowledge roles of the federal, state and local governments, business and labor. Whether workers in our state are Native Americans, fourth-generation Montanans, Canadian, Hispanic or from other places, their success is our success. Their stories are our stories.

Lynda Bourque Moss of Billings is executive director of the Foundation for Community Vitality and represents Senate District 26. In December, she attended "State and Local Immigration Laws, An Open Dialogue," sponsored by the National Council of State Legislatures, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, National Association of Home Builders and the National Roofing Contractors Association in Washington, D.C.