
ELIGIBLE FOR EMPLOYMENT

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The following article was authored by

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The construction industry faces labor shortages in most parts of the country. As a result, many wall and ceiling companies are turning away work, not seeing enough qualified job applicants available for hire in order to take on additional projects.

“What we’re getting are people who have been passed around by others, people who have not met the production goals, work quality or work ethics of what we need,” says Craig Daley, president at Daley’s Drywall & Taping, Inc., Campbell, Calif. “This has put pressure on hiring.”

With 8 million undocumented foreign-born workers in the country, we have an available supply of labor exists to help meet demand. What do you think?

44 Million Immigrants

We are used to having foreigners living among us. The United States has 44 million immigrants, more than any other nation. One of every seven people living in the United States was born elsewhere.

But, they’re not foreigners anymore. Nearly 34 million are either legal permanent residents (with green cards) or U.S. citizens. Of the people you work with, one of every five, on average, is foreign-born, and most are properly documented. And, according to Pew Research Center, Americans support more immigrants receiving legal status. (See the article on immigration on page 34.)

So, we have a market demand and an available labor supply. But instead of having thoughtful

conversation on the topics, we have rhetoric. My sources say that both Democrats and Republicans are afraid that by acting on immigration, they could upset their constituents and lose upcoming elections.

“[The politicians] are stagnant in this area,” Daley says. “It doesn’t seem to be on the top of their list of things to do. Nobody wants to take nationwide control of the issue.”

Recent Actions

President Donald Trump has taken control of some aspects of immigration. His administration has stepped up the number of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Form I-9 audits, which have detained and deported workers. He has repealed the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, revoked Temporary Protected Status and said he will sign an executive order ending birthright citizenry.

In October, he dispatched more than 5,000 troops to the Mexico border, where the media showed soldiers installing razor wire fences ahead of the arrival of a caravan of 3,500 Central American refugees traveling on foot.

These actions don’t benefit wall and ceiling construction.

“Every time they do an ICE audit, they take away employees who may not be here legally, but who pay taxes, and force them into the underground economy to work for a labor broker,” says Stan Marek, CEO at Marek in Houston.

I understand that solving the labor shortage and the immigration problem are not priorities for all. Not every corner of construction has trouble finding workers.

“The labor shortage in the northeast isn’t a problem right now for the exterior industry,” says Dominick P. Baruffi II, president and CEO at Jersey Panel Corporation and executive director at Sto Panel Technology. “But future projections are following the national trend, which is concerning.”

But I think these issues will hit home sooner or later.

“We boast that our workforce is all in-house—no labor subs or pieceworkers,” says Rob Aird, president of Robert A. Aird, Inc., Frederick, Md. “We’d like to hold to that, but it’s a strain, and we’ve had to use some labor subs of late.”

The situation is interesting in Houston, which has a booming construction economy. Of the 304,000 construction workers in that city, 72,000 are unauthorized immigrant workers, says the Migration Policy Institute.

Will the government officially allow undocumented immigrants to work?

Two Problems Solved

Our industry wants to preserve jobs for American workers. Wall and ceiling firms want to build

quality structures, and when demand is great, use foreign-born workers in a pinch.

Demand is great right now, and a supply of labor is right there in front of us. Can the government find a legal solution to allow unauthorized workers to be added to our payrolls, trained and put on the job site? If the government can solve the immigration problem, it might also solve the labor shortage. It could solve both in one fell swoop.

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