

Steve White: Companies who hire illegals shouldn't get tax breaks

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West Virginia is facing a crisis costing us thousands of jobs and millions of dollars.

But no one in government appears to even recognize the problem, let alone try to deal with it.

The crisis? Companies are importing people, perhaps illegally, to take jobs in our communities. I'm not talking about doctors or a family restaurant. I'm concerned about major industry sectors such as construction and lumber mills that have traditionally provided bread-winning employment for local workers.

Giving away jobs in West Virginia is just plain bad policy for many reasons. Most outrageous is the fact that some of the companies hiring imports are getting state tax credits to reward them for job creation.

Yes, that's right. We give tax credits to companies who in turn import workers, many of whom may be illegally in this country.

Companies replace local workers with imported workers because they will work for less -- a whole lot less.

Tax credits going to companies who import low-wage workers, perhaps illegally in this country, who take jobs currently held by local workers. It's a sad state of affairs.

I have to say "may be illegally in this country" because no one responsible for checking their legal status will do so.

The federal agency with authority to check is called ICE -- Immigration and Customs Enforcement. But ICE can't, or won't, do the job.

We've called dozens of times and hear excuses but get no action. ICE agents have told me they are forbidden by "Washington" to go onto a construction job site.

And it gets worse. When local law enforcement officials apprehend people who are illegally in this country, ICE often instructs these officials to release the offenders.

Working families in West Virginia cannot afford to let this activity continue. We can't afford to give companies tax breaks for giving away jobs. And we can't afford to pay government agencies to do nothing.

It's costing our state thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in lost tax revenues.

Here are some suggestions to correct the problems.

First, we need government agencies to enforce the laws of the land. If federal agencies such as ICE won't do their job, state agencies must be allowed to step up and take over.

Second, it is too easy for employers to hire illegal workers. With a fake ID, employers are relieved of any responsibility. Employers must be required to verify IDs are real and match the individuals hired.

Third, we must stop giving tax credits to companies that displace local workers with low-wage imports. It's a free country and companies can legally hire whomever they wish, but taxpayers should not subsidize putting themselves out of a job.

Fourth, state and local governments can and should work together to make sure there is a level playing field of enforcement for all laws. Most businesses play by the rules and it is unfair to give others a competitive advantage through lax enforcement.

To shine a brighter light on this subject, the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation arranged for broadcasts of a TV documentary report, "West Virginia's Underground Economy", that appeared in the southern West Virginia area recently on WCHS-TV Channel 8 and will air in the Clarksburg-Morgantown area during this Labor Day weekend.

Why must construction workers spend their hard-earned funds to try and convince government to act? I don't know. But we hope others will join us in demanding some reasonable steps be taken.

