

A conversation with Tamar Jacoby, March 31, 2016

Participants

- Tamar Jacoby – President & CEO, ImmigrationWorks USA (IW)
- Alexander Berger – Program Officer, U.S. Policy, Open Philanthropy Project

Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Ms. Tamar Jacoby.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Ms. Jacoby of IW to get an update. Conversation topics included IW's recent activities, budget, and staffing changes.

IW's activities

Guest worker visa bill

IW has collaborated with Senator Jeff Flake on a bill introducing a new worker visa program. The program would require employers to first test the employment market for American labor and then receive a permit to hire migrant workers. Migrant worker visas would not be tied to specific requests from employers, allowing employees to change jobs once they have entered the country. The bill is intended to allow more market flexibility for both employers and migrant workers.

The pilot program allows for a flexible number of visas, ranging from 45,000 to 85,000 per year depending on demand, and will only be open to employers in areas where the unemployment rate is below 5%. The program legally expires in 10 years, though the hope would be that Congress would want to renew it.

A benefit of this program is that it will be studied by the Congressional Research Service to assess its effect on, e.g., American wages, the healthcare system, small businesses, etc.

Having a bill introduced has made it easier to build a coalition of other groups to advocate for the program with members of Congress, even though the bill itself is not likely to move this year.

Engaging members of Congress

Activity around immigration reform in Congress has slowed down in recent months, though various groups are working to maintain some level of energy. Current immigration debates are primarily occurring as part of the 2016 presidential campaign (which IW has less ability to influence).

IW and other groups have been involved in a significant number of meetings this year with members of Congress to discuss how to prepare for likely immigration reform debates in Congress in 2017.

Engaging the business community

IW is working to increase support for immigration reform in the business community. While IW has found people generally supportive of the plan in the Flake bill, it has been somewhat difficult to persuade people to devote attention to immigration issues given the current overall relative lack of activity in this area.

Conference calls

In the past, IW has invited its member employers to participate in conference calls where three or four people present about a particular topic and participants can ask questions. IW plans to host one of these calls about the upcoming Supreme Court case on President Obama's executive action on immigration.

Polling of legal immigrants from Mexico

IW has conducted four focus groups and plans to soon conduct a large poll of legal immigrants from Mexico, surveying their attitudes towards integration (e.g., learning English, paying taxes, becoming U.S. citizens). IW's goal is to improve public perception of legal immigrants by showing, for instance, that they hold common American values, contribute to society, and have a desire to integrate.

H-2B visa deal

A provision increasing the number of allowed H-2B visas was included in last year's budget deal, in part due to grassroots employer support for the measure. The debate around this H-2B visa deal ended up being larger and higher-profile than some members of Congress had anticipated, and may have made some members less likely to support guest worker programs going forward.

State-based visas

Ms. Jacoby believes that state-based visa programs could potentially be effective, but work on this is not currently a priority for IW. Ms. Jacoby has discussed the idea with some officials in Texas.

Organizational updates

Ms. Jacoby has been splitting her time roughly evenly between IW and Opportunity America.

Staff turnover

IW usually has four full-time staff (including Ms. Jacoby) in the office, plus two part-time, senior-level consultants serving as Vice President (also involved in strategy) and financial controller.

IW has had a significant amount of turnover in recent months. The three other junior staff members (besides Ms. Jacoby) have left since December, and it has been somewhat challenging for IW to find and retain replacements.

Budget

IW has about six months of runway, which is fairly typical. Ms. Jacoby is currently still taking 75% of her budgeted salary.

All Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at <http://www.openphilanthropy.org/research/conversations>