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POLICY BRIEF

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Creating Common Ground California's Strategies for Integrating Newcomers

A recent study by the Little Hoover Commission suggests that California policymakers need to consider new public programs in order to successfully assimilate immigrants. The Commission's recommendations attempt to align federal immigration policy with the interests of state and community integration.

For over 150 years immigrants have been making California their home. During the past decade, California experienced a substantial population growth, leaving state officials with a need to develop strategies on how to effectively integrate newcomers.

In July 2002, The Little Hoover Commission, a bipartisan board composed of appointed public members from California, released a study to guide policymakers through the rhetoric of California's immigrant debate. The report, entitled "We the People: Helping Newcomers Become Californians," distills basic principles which experts believe should be guidelines for new public discussion.

The Study

Immigration is often defined by critical tensions. Although the growing number of immigrants in California creates various opinions among state officials, most agree that immigrants play a crucial role in the state's workforce. Not only do immigrants contribute cultural ideas that expand the growth of American businesses, but they also provide a hope and great example by pursuing the American Dream. California politicians are constantly seeking new insight into the complexities of integrating immigrants because they understand that the future of California is greatly influenced by immigrants.

The study explains that in many areas immigrant labor contributes immensely to the economy. These immigrants include undocumented immigrants as well as migrant workers who, despite exclusion from public benefits, continue to contribute their labor and tax payments. 1

Given the opportunity, the report found that most immigrants advance from unskilled to skilled labor. Indeed, as immigrants gain additional skills they tend to find better employment opportunities, leaving vacancies that must be filled in the workforce. Even with the large number of immigrants migrating to the area to fill the vacancies, the report claims that the INS is not naturalizing enough immigrants to maintain California's booming economy.

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Common Objectives

The Hoover Commission found that distinctions in immigrant status create problems. In fact, in most California communities, the study reports that leaders are more concerned with whether immigrants in their community follow the law and respect public safety, than with their legal status. But when tensions arise, anti-immigrant sentiments are usually targeted towards legal and illegal individuals alike.

Findings from the Hoover Commission report suggest that current immigration initiatives in California do not encourage immigrants to be participatory community members to attain citizenship.

Who is Responsible?

According to the study, the public sector should take responsibility for creating opportunities for immigrants who in turn are responsible for their own initiative. Unfortunately, newcomers are often times not welcome into communities. California should provide immigrants with ideas on how to contribute as community members, in turn, this would bring success to both communities and immigrants.

The report argues that California should also replace inconsistent policy towards immigrants and instead reward them by making them eligible for most public programs. In addition, those who choose not to be actively involved in their community would receive lower priority access to basic public services. Most members of the commission agree that until the goals of the state and local community are aligned, California should extend benefits to undocumented immigrants without violating any federal laws.

The “Golden State”

One suggestion for helping immigrants integrate is to establish the Golden State Residency Program. This program would provide incentives for immigrants to give back to the community and those who helped them. Members of the commission believe that this program should be open to all immigrants, until federal law is reformed.

The suggested criteria for this program include a commitment to establish residency, proficiency in English and participation in civic affairs, to name a few. By fulfilling these requirements, participants would be eligible for benefits similar to those afforded to citizens, such as welfare, social security and Medicaid.

Helping Out

Members of the commission argue that California has an obligation to help immigrants succeed but policies that ration public access hinder many from becoming responsible and successful community members. Public organizations must help poor immigrants live above minimum standards and become economically self-sufficient. Without doing this, communities face larger

and more enduring cost associated with unemployment, inadequate healthcare, unsafe housing and other concerns.

In order to effectively monitor the use of funds and public services, the Hoover Commission recommends that the state create the California Commission on Immigrants. The primary goals of this organization would help establish a statewide dialogue between local immigrant communities, advocate for effective programs and evaluate the progress of California's integration system.

Conclusion

The Little Hoover Commission study reminds policymakers from California that they must work to align local interests with federal policy if California is to maintain its economic vitality. The Report contends that if California is to maintain a strong economic future, federal immigration policies must be reformed to allow immigrants an opportunity to become self-reliant and responsible community members.

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