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Immigrants are welcome and very much needed in Saskatchewan communities

For over a century, Saskatchewan has welcomed newcomers as productive members of society, as employers and employees, community builders and contributors to our economy. The need for such new people now is as strong as ever; our labour shortage is not a ploy manufactured by business to obtain 'cheap labour' as some groups may suggest. As of today, there are over 15,000 job vacancies posted on the SaskJobs website, and our province is leading the nation in low unemployment. Shortening hours, closing doors, or forgoing sales because there are too few workers will benefit no one.

The Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) program has been and continues to be a vital component to the growth of Saskatchewan's economy, particularly for the regions and sectors not typically attractive to potential employees. For many businesses, it is only through the availability of foreign workers that they have been able to meet demand and grow.

Contrary to popular belief, employers are not using the program to save money by bringing in workers from other countries. It just doesn't work that way. Using the TFW program is costly: an employer must go through all the administrative steps to qualify, pay for a lower skilled worker's transportation costs (either from a worker's current location in Canada or his home abroad) and provide wages based on a regional average (which is often higher than the Saskatchewan average). If they have to terminate a lower skilled TFW worker, they are also on the hook to pay for return transportation to the worker's country of residence.

However, the TFW program fills a real need and employers are willing to pay for it. It is due to this demand that the TFW program has grown and expanded beyond its original mandate - namely, the need to bring in higher skilled workers to fill labour shortages. In 2002, the program was altered, and has since become a patchwork of legislation trying to fill a myriad of needs across our huge country. The Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce understands these changes were implemented to meet new demands, but the clarity of the program, understanding of the rules, and inherent contradictions are becoming reoccurring issues. How can a foreign worker be contracted to one employer for two years but also be the first to be laid off, forcing them to leave the country? In many cases, it is the foreign worker who finds themselves with no voice in the situation.

Clearly we simply cannot afford to stop or restrict use of the TFW program, the unintended consequences would gut too many businesses and communities, but we do need changes to it. Immigration is, always has been, and always will be important for our province, and our country, and it is essential we do it right.

We see this renewed discussion as an opportunity to engage the Federal government, the Provincial government, business and immigrants in a meaningful dialogue, to ensure that the program evolves to address the diverse needs of the provinces, while continuing to serve business and Canada's newcomers.

By developing good public policy, we can build a better Saskatchewan for today, and tomorrow. We look forward to being part of this effort.

Steve McLellan
CEO
Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce
Cell: 306.533.7686
Email: smclellan@saskchamber.com