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**An overhaul of our immigration system is long overdue**, and the pieces are now in place to remedy that with a system that addresses the modern challenges we face in the business community and the nation.

We Americans pride ourselves on being global thinkers — we aspire to being a part of the global economy. It's time to back up that thinking with a modern immigration system that can attract and keep in the United States the world's top students, innovators, entrepreneurs and job creators.



Andre Dean

More baby boomers are hitting retirement age every day, increasing competition for the available workforce, and it is vital that our businesses in Memphis be able to recruit and deploy workers to fill both the high- and low-skilled sectors of our economy. This gives the United States an economic imperative to join the myriad other countries that are changing their laws to benefit from a pool of global resources. We face a competitive disadvantage as long as our industries must struggle to fill positions due to an ineffective, inefficient and outdated immigration system.

Our immigration system has not changed in any substantive way in nearly 50 years. The reform legislation passed by the U.S. Senate and now being considered by the House of Representatives addresses these long-overdue issues. Thanks to Sens. Lamar Alexander and Bob Corker, who are supporting immigration reform, our country may finally have the opportunity to approach this issue with common-sense policies.

Corker is to be commended for the approach taken in his amendment to the Senate bill. It addresses undocumented immigrants currently in the U.S. and adds stopgap measures to protect our borders, stem the tide of illegal immigrants and curtail visa overstays, which account for 40 percent of those unlawfully present in our country.

Under the Senate legislation, undocumented immigrants already here would get the opportunity to stay, by applying as “registered provisional immigrants” and paying a \$500 fine and some administrative fees.

The bill would repair the immigration system and create this simple process to allow the 11 million or more undocumented immigrants to stay in the United States and immediately begin paying taxes and contributing to the society they want to join. They would begin the process to earn citizenship over a period of several years. The legislation would not open the floodgates to millions of new immigrants. On the contrary, the 11 million are already here. As Corker has said, this new status would bring them out of the shadows and into productive lives with access to the benefits and freedoms that make this country great.

“It’s a win for our country, and it’s the moral thing to do,” Corker said.

We have highly skilled immigrants living right here in Memphis, and many more attending our colleges and universities. Immigration reform would give them the chance to stay here — to start businesses and create jobs. It would open the door for more foreign investment, help create an increased demand for goods and services and create an even bigger talent pool at a time when we need it.

The Greater Memphis Chamber has joined a growing coalition of Tennessee business, civic and community leaders who believe it is time for Congress to take action to create a modern immigration system:

-- One that actually works — is easier to understand, navigate and implement.

-- One that ensures all immigration laws are enforced and our borders are secured.

-- One that attracts then keeps the world’s top students, innovators, entrepreneurs and job creators here in the U.S.

-- One that recruits and deploys the workers we need to fill both the high- and low-skilled sectors of our economy.

-- One that brings nearly 11 million undocumented workers currently living in the shadows into the legal economy so they can learn our language and history, pay more in taxes and contribute to a growing American economy.

The Greater Memphis Chamber believes the time is right to encourage Tennessee’s senators and U.S. representatives to work toward bipartisan immigration reform that secures our borders, addresses our workforce needs and provides a pathway toward earned citizenship.

*Andre Dean is vice president of public policy and community affairs for the Greater Memphis Chamber.*