

## Audacity to hope for reform?

By: [John C. Wester](#)

March 19, 2010 05:10 AM EDT

Sunday, thousands of people are expected to descend on the National Mall to call for immigration reform — a goal that has eluded pro-immigrant advocates for decades. With Congress still working on health care, it seems these advocates might have to wait until next year for reform, if not longer.

This would be unfortunate, if not tragic, for both the immigrant community and the welfare of the nation. While immigrants have historically served as our national scapegoats at times of economic downturn, in reality, they can help solve the problems we now confront.

Myths perpetuated by reform opponents suggest that immigrants drain our resources, take our jobs and fail to pay into the system — whether it is income taxes, Social Security taxes or health care costs. But recent studies show that the opposite is true.

Providing legal status to the undocumented, according to a study by the University of California at Los Angeles, could result in increased federal tax revenues of \$5.4 billion in the first three years and an additional \$1.5 trillion to the nation's gross national product within 10 years.

By bringing workers out of the shadows and granting them legal protection, the report concluded, immigrants would be able to pay their full share of taxes, start businesses and buy products, improving our dismal fiscal situation and helping us rebuild a sound economy.

A second study, by the Economics Policy Institute, found that immigrants largely complement, rather than compete against, U.S. workers in the job market.

This should be particularly important when we return to a more robust economy. For the nation will need workers in important basic industries, like

agriculture, construction and services. The study also found that legalizing undocumented laborers would improve wages for all workers, including U.S. citizens.

Besides the mounting evidence that hardworking immigrants can help improve the economy, a larger, humanitarian issue is at stake — one that should heighten the urgency for reform.

For too long, we have looked the other way as undocumented immigrant workers were exploited in the workplace and unduly punished by our enforcement laws. We are all willing to accept their toil and taxes — as much as \$7 billion in Social Security payments per year, for example — yet we are unwilling to offer them basic legal protections.

They remain a permanent underclass in our democracy, lacking rights or the ability to raise families without fear.

Our actions are justified, some would argue, because these immigrants broke the law and brought their fate on themselves.

But is it right for our nation to punish these individuals in this way when they are only trying to find a low-level job — not to harm us? Or should we look at all the circumstances, as many courts would, in deciding their penalties?

These mitigating factors include sweat equity, the lack of available legal avenues and the contributions they have already made to their host communities.

Let us remember that undocumented immigrants' offense — which is not a crime but a civil infraction — is motivated by the need to work to support their families and feed their children.

The proportionate punishment, many would reason, is payment of a fine and any unpaid income taxes and a long wait in the back of the green card line — in other words, a legalization program that allows them to pay their debt and earn full membership in our society.

In return, our country would continue to benefit from their work, industry and strong family values, without compromising our foundational principles of equality, freedom and opportunity.

The political will to do the right thing on this issue is not strong. Many elected officials, along with the administration, remain fearful of a backlash — despite national polls that consistently show solid majority support for immigration reform.

These officials should remember why the American people sent them to Washington: to solve problems and to lead. This requires courage and a willingness to educate constituents about the best path forward.

On immigration, these qualities have been sorely lacking.

No doubt, many faces in the crowd Sunday will be U.S. citizens who know the terror of having a loved one deported.

There are sure to be others there, particularly younger immigrants, who know the frustration of being unable to fully contribute their talents to the future of our nation.

They represent only a fraction of the millions who have painful stories about our broken immigration system.

Yet they all maintain the audacity to hope that America, in its wisdom, will soon repair it. For they are part of the answer to our nation's challenges, not the problem.

For their sake and ours, let us not let them down.

*John C. Wester, the bishop of Salt Lake City, is chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration.*