

New professional licenses open a brighter future for migrants

Translated by ContentEngine LLC . CE Noticias Financieras , English ed.; Miami [Miami]16 July 2021.

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FULL TEXT

Denver (CO), Jul 16 (EFE News).- With the expansion in thirteen states of access to professional licenses for immigrants, more and more can be realized with their profession, while benefiting local and state economies. According to a recent report by the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC), 30% of immigrants over the age of 25 in the United States have a college degree or higher education but cannot practice their professions due to lack of access to occupational licenses.

At the same time, it reveals that in 2019 there were 7.3 million existing job vacancies in the country, against only 5.7 million potentially available to fill them.

And while hiring immigrants would not close that gap, professional licenses for immigrants will help reduce that disparity.

"States are issuing those licenses because they have realized the important role that immigrants have in filling vacancies in the labor market," Maria Gabriela "Gaby" Pacheco, director of community advocacy, development and communications at TheDreamUS, the largest college access program for "dreamers," told Efe.

In the face of the federal government's inaction, he explained, states have been left in charge of creating state laws to respond to the needs of immigrants residing in those states.

The objective would be to avoid that, as Viviana Westbrook, attorney of state affairs of CLINIC, explained to Efe, there are "highly trained" immigrants who in the United States "give them work cleaning houses" and similar jobs.

"In an instant lives are disrupted," Westbrook lamented.

STATE INITIATIVES

According to CLINIC, the states that offer professional, business or business licenses to immigrants without permanent legal presence in the country are Arkansas, California, Colorado, South Dakota, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New York and Utah.

In 2014, California and Florida were the first states to adopt such measures, and this year the trend has continued. In Arkansas, a new law recently allows those covered by Deferred Action (DACA) to obtain professional licenses, and in Colorado a law was passed that expands access to these permits to help alleviate the "urgent needs" of workers.

Pacheco opined that the occupations that will benefit most from immigrants with work licenses are in the areas of nursing, teaching and engineering, and stressed that immigrants add another benefit to the labor market, that of being bilingual.

The issue had already been analyzed in 2019 by the non-partisan group Presidential Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, which estimated that there are about 1,100 careers and professions that people with Temporary Protected Status (TPS) or DACA could access.

FEDERAL MEASURES

In that context, Pacheco said, it is no longer a question of states granting immigrants driver's licenses, discounts on college fees or, as now, occupation licenses. More is needed.

"The next step is for the federal Congress to pass a comprehensive immigration reform that legalizes those who are in the country without status and modernizes the immigration system," he said.

A key element of that modernization is for the federal government to implement a system so that "immigrants with special talents and abilities can safely migrate to our nation."

In the specific case of Colorado, the new law SB21-077 seeks to have more immigrants with the necessary credentials dedicated to nursing and teaching, the two occupations with the highest number of vacancies in this state.

"Many people are already at the forefront of work doing essential jobs and are often not citizens. And that's why they can't access professional licenses to be plumbers, electricians, nurses or teachers to help other immigrants achieve the same," said state Sen. Julie Gonzales, the bill's driving force, shortly before the law passed with bipartisan support.

And in Utah, Tony Yapias of The Latino Project stressed that that state allows even undocumented lawyers to practice their profession with its licenses. As a result, he said, the current unemployment rate in Utah is 2.8%, compared to 5.9% nationally.

"Occupational leave is a very good policy because there is a great need for people who have those licenses to do the most necessary jobs. I personally know DACA and TPS recipients who were able to open their businesses and are already contributing to the state tax base," he said.

CREDIT: CE Noticias Financieras English - CENFENG

DETAILS

Subject:	Teaching; Higher education; Employment; Noncitizens; Licenses; Immigration; Professions; Labor market
Business indexing term:	Subject: Employment Labor market
Location:	United States--US Colorado Arkansas California Florida Utah
Identifier / keyword:	ECO:ECONOMIA TRABAJO; POL:POLITICA EXTERIOR
Publication title:	CE Noticias Financieras, English ed.; Miami
Publication year:	2021
Publication date:	Jul 16, 2021
Publisher:	ContentEngine LLC, a Florida limited liability company
Place of publication:	Miami
Country of publication:	US Minor Outlying Islands, Miami
Publication subject:	Business And Economics
Source type:	Wire Feeds
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2552582701

Document URL: <https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/new-professional-licenses-open-brighter-future/docview/2552582701/se-2?accountid=44910>

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Last updated: 2021-07-18

Database: ABI/INFORM Dateline

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