

Testimony of Bill Patrie regarding HB 1493

Mr. Chairman and members of the House Industry, Business and Labor committee. My name is Bill Patrie and I served as the director of the economic development commission while George Sinner was governor. I started work in 1985 and early in my tenure in office came to understand rural communities could not out compete major urban places for the attraction of workers. North Dakota graduates were leaving North Dakota rural communities and not coming back. In 1989 during the state's centennial celebration I worked with many rural school districts to compile alumni lists of people who had moved out of state. Our working group estimated that over 300,000 high school graduates had left the state of North Dakota by 1989. I came to understand they were not the target for recruiting back. It became clear to me that the target for recruitment were those people who's lives would be better off here than where they were currently living. I talked with historians who understood immigration, they helped me understand the two forces affecting migration. The first is a push force that compels people to leave their home. Those forces were famines, wars, crime, persecution, or the lack of any jobs. The pull forces were the availability of jobs, and welcoming communities that wanted newcomers. The most famous pull force was the Homestead act. The State had an office of immigration since 1890 which operated until 1933. The 2023 Legislature created the Department of Legal Immigration once again hoping to find ways to attract foreign born folks to North Dakota. My wife and I have been involved in sponsoring two families from the Ukraine under a program called Humanitarian Parole. In both cases those families were pushed out of the Ukraine and attracted North Dakota because of our sponsorship and employment opportunities. In the first case, the husband works for an oil company in Dickinson, and the second case, the husband works as a mechanical engineer for a company that contracts with Dakota Gas in Beulah. The folks on humanitarian parole were granted permission to work and live in the United States for two years. Previous similar programs (there were about 19 of them) existed since the end of World War II. In many of those cases such as the Vietnam war, those folks were granted a path to citizenship. I am hopeful the current administration will consider that option as well. In most cases those beneficiaries are working, have social security numbers and don't have a home country to go back to. The Department of Legal immigration may find fertile ground to recruit those folks from other states if communities in North Dakota want them and can help convince the administration to grant them legal protective status after the two years parole ends. There are something like 800,000 humanitarian parolees in the United States all here legally with sponsors who have met them at airports and provided housing for them. North Dakota has already experienced some success with this program in Carrington, Bottineau, Harvey, Dickinson, Bismarck, Grand Forks, Valley City and Fargo. Rural North Dakota already employs over 3,000 foreign born farm workers from nearly a thousand farmer sponsors. Foreign born people are teaching in our schools and colleges, working in our hospitals and nursing homes and thousands are students in our colleges. I am very glad the 2023 legislature created the office of Legal Immigration and they have much work to do to help grow our communities. I urge you to vote no on this bill and actively support the work of this department.

I would be glad to answer an questions.