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A statement in support of  
SB 261 COMMISSION AND OFFICE OF EASTERN EUROPEAN AFFAIRS  
by George Vredeveld, Professor of Economics, Emeritus  
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As the Republic of Bulgaria's Honorary Consul to Ohio, I have had the opportunity to meet many Bulgarian immigrants who have contributed significantly to the welfare of America and Ohio. One of the first persons I met was Dr. Widen Tabakoff, an aerospace engineer at the University of Cincinnati. After failed rocket launches, the acclaimed scientist Wernher von Braun invited Tabakoff to join his Rocket Research Group where he was integral in the construction of the Saturn 5 rocket which sent the first Apollo 11 spacecraft to the moon in 1969. After this assignment, he joined the University of Cincinnati as professor in Aerospace Engineering. Dr. Tabakoff not only established a strong externally funded research program but he also attracted engineering talent to Ohio, including people from his native Bulgaria.

While Tabakoff's contributions stand out, he is not alone. In my hometown of Cincinnati, the workforce is well represented by Bulgarian-born professionals, including chemists, engineers, architects, teachers and doctors. A quick survey of the impact of immigrants from other Eastern European countries and conversations with Lauel Tombazzi, Chairperson of the Eastern European Congress of Ohio, show similar benefits to our state.

As a professor of economics who has specialized in the study of the economics of human resources, I am keenly aware that the vitality of a region's workforce is dependent on the size and quality of its workforce. Currently, the capability of our workforce to sustain and grow our economy is threatened by an aging population, lower fertility rates and a lower percentage of the population that is working. This threat is present for the nation as a whole, but it is especially severe in most Midwest and Northeast states, including Ohio.

Immigration has been essential in addressing the threat of a decreasing workforce in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 13.7 percent of American residents are foreign-born. In Ohio that percentage is only 4.3 percent. We are not getting our share. To attract more of the energy and talent that flows from foreign-born citizens, Ohio should initiate a strategy to grow and enhance our workforce. The facts are clear. Immigrants participate in the U.S. labor force at a higher rate than native-born Americans. They also are more likely to own businesses than native-born Americans and they tend to be better educated. Approximately 30 percent of working aged immigrants who arrived in the U.S. in 2017 were professionals or technical workers.

Today we are enjoying unemployment rates that are relatively very low. The flip side of this is that labor markets are tight. Sooner or later this constrained labor supply will be a brake on growth as the workforce ages. In brief, we need more legal immigrants who are attracted to our state. The proposed Commission and Office of Eastern European Affairs is one positive step toward making our state more inviting.

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