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Another Voice: Easing of H-1B visa cap would benefit the Great Lakes region

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By Eva Hassett and Dottie Gallagher-Cohen

Every April the federal government begins accepting applications for H-1B visas and, again this year, just days after filing opened, the cap was reached. These visas allow highly educated and skilled professionals to work temporarily in the United States, and clearly the supply does not meet the demand. The gap is holding us back as we look to build Buffalo's STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and advanced manufacturing economy.

H-1B visas are capped at a total of 85,000 each year. Last year, more than 172,000 applications were received in less than a week. The International Institute of Buffalo, as part of the WE Global Network, and the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, in cooperation with the Great Lakes Metro Chambers Coalition, is advocating for the cap to be eased. Increasing the number of H-1B visas available to qualified applicants will help address a skills gap and produce measurable returns for the job market.

Today in America, immigrants make up 25 percent of all practicing physicians and receive 50 percent of all doctorate degrees in engineering and 40 percent of all new master's in computer science, physical science and engineering. Immigrants are also nearly twice as likely to start their own business compared to non-immigrants. According to the Partnership for a New American Economy, for every 100 foreign-born graduates of an advanced degree program in the United States who stay here to work in STEM-related fields, 262 jobs are created for Americans. In fact, the same group estimates that workers who received H-1B visas from 2010 through 2013 will end up creating more than 700,000 jobs for American workers by 2020.

If the H-1B visa cap was less restrictive, we believe the Great Lakes region would be poised to benefit. Rust Belt cities populating the Great Lakes region have had their share of hard economic times, but many, including Buffalo, are on their way back. Last year there were more than 1.6 million STEM-related job postings in the Great Lakes region. Americans alone cannot fill these jobs. Easing the cap would not only help sponsor companies hire qualified candidates, but allow talented foreign-born students, who come to Buffalo to advance their education, the chance to stay and contribute to our community.

Raising the H-1B visa cap is not only a part of immigration reform, it is part of a sound economic development strategy that includes a focus on the contributions of the foreign-born. Our region is primed for investment by high-skilled immigrants. Together, let's urge Congress to lift onerous restrictions on H-1B visas to help support Buffalo's STEM and advanced manufacturing sectors.

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