

## **A conversation with Tamar Jacoby, January 14, 2015**

### **Participants**

- Tamar Jacoby – President and CEO, ImmigrationWorks USA
- Alexander Berger – Program Officer, US Policy, Open Philanthropy Project

**Note:** These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Tamar Jacoby.

### **Summary**

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Tamar Jacoby to follow up on its grant to ImmigrationWorks, which supports efforts to organize small business owners to advocate for policies that allow more lower-skill workers to come to the U.S. Conversation topics included upcoming focus groups, guest worker pilot programs, passing reforms through Congress, IW's future, and Opportunity America.

### **Focus groups**

On January 27th and 28th, 2015, ImmigrationWorks (IW) will hold two focus groups in Dallas and two in Denver to test immigration policy messaging. The focus groups will include Republicans, Democrats, college graduates, and non-college graduates. Ms. Jacoby is particularly interested in how non-college graduate Republicans respond to different messages before testing the successful messages in a national poll.

IW had been waiting until there was more clarity around the stance of immigration policy to conduct the focus groups. Now that President Obama has announced his executive action and the 2014 midterm elections are over, Ms. Jacoby believes that it is the appropriate time to gauge attitudes toward policies for increasing lower-skill immigration.

Focus groups require a large investment of time and money, but provide valuable information when done properly. IW plans to spend \$100,000 to conduct four focus groups and a national poll. To choose a polling firm to work with, Ms. Jacoby spoke with three potential polling firms, asked them to submit proposals, and then had extensive discussions at IW to determine which firm had the strongest proposal.

### **Guest worker pilot program proposal**

#### *Current immigration reform landscape*

The common wisdom in Washington is that Congress is unlikely to pass any immigration reform bills this year. However, House Republicans may draft a bill with the primary goal of securing the

borders, and, Ms. Jacoby believed at the time, such a bill could serve as a vehicle for attaching other immigration reforms such as increased H-1B or H-2A temporary agricultural worker visas, or for a potential new guest worker pilot program.

#### *IW's plan to propose a guest worker pilot program*

IW plans to advocate that Congress implement a guest worker pilot program in places with low unemployment rates. Twenty-six percent of U.S. counties have unemployment rates below four percent. Many of the counties with vacant jobs and low unemployment rates are found in Texas, North Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Iowa.

The idea of a guest worker pilot program has been well-received during conversations with Congressional lawmakers and their staffs. At the time of the conversation with Open Philanthropy, Ms. Jacoby was optimistic that such a program could potentially be implemented as an add-on to a border security bill. Immigration reforms such as E-Verify, H-2A visas, and H-2B visas began as pilot programs before being expanded. A well-implemented pilot program could be studied to provide evidence on the effect that guest worker programs have on illegal immigration and employment rates.

Passing a well-written pilot program through Congress requires first identifying the appropriate lawmakers to draft and champion the bill.

#### *Models for a new guest worker pilot program*

The W-visa that was included in the Senate comprehensive immigration reform bill in 2013 is an example of a reasonably well-designed guest worker program for low-skilled foreign workers. Despite having a small number of visas available and including less-than-optimal bureaucratic processes and fees, the W-visa demonstrates the potential political feasibility of reforms.

IW supports “dual intent” visas, a concept which was introduced with the H-1B visa. While most visas require immigrants to return home, H-1B visas allow immigrants who start a family and achieve professional success to seek lawful permanent resident status when the visa expires.

### **IW's funding and future**

Funding for groups like IW became scarce after immigration reform appeared to lose momentum. IW only has about half of the funding that it needs for its planned 2015 budget. IW's existing funds have been used toward core operations, so IW was not able to hire a new staff member to work on advocacy and policy development as originally planned.

IW's future operations depend on whether it sees a useful role for its work and whether it is able to secure additional funding.

However, at the time of the conversation with Open Philanthropy, Ms. Jacoby was optimistic about IW's projects for the current year, such as the polling project and the possibility of pilot programs. Additionally, if immigration reform regains momentum, she believes additional funding will become available.

## **Opportunity America**

In addition to being the President and CEO of IW, Ms. Jacoby recently founded and serves as President and CEO of the social mobility think tank Opportunity America. On January 15, 2015, Opportunity America and Arizona State University hosted the "Access and Excellence" conference in Washington, D.C. to discuss the role of higher education in promoting social mobility. With additional funding, Jacoby would like to host a summit about mobility and hire an employee to manage the organization's communications strategy.

*All Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at <http://www.givewell.org/conversations>*