

Immigrants contribute to isle economy and cultural fabric

By Amy Agbayani

The 2020 U.S. Census showed that Hawaii is the most diverse state in the nation. Most foreign-born persons in Hawaii are from the Philippines and then China, Japan, Korea, Mexico and Pacific Island countries. Currently in Hawaii, 1 in 5 people are immigrants. Immigrants are our neighbors, coworkers, friends and ohana. Most Hawaii immigrants — approximately 60% — become U.S. citizens.

President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to deport undocumented immigrants for many reasons — chief among them is that immigrants are bad for the economy and take away jobs from U.S. citizens.

Hawaii and national data do not support this; deporting millions of immigrants will harm our economy.

Immigrants' contributions to Hawaii's economy are immense.

Immigrants in Hawaii comprise over 20% of the labor force, work-

ing mostly in the agriculture, hospitality and health fields. Over a quarter — 27.4% — of all entrepreneurs in Hawaii are immigrants. Each year immigrants pay billions in taxes and spend billions to power Hawaii's economy.

It is indisputable that immigrants — both newcomers and longtime residents — are providing essential services and strengthening our economy.

Even with this cursory knowledge of immigrants' economic benefits to Hawaii, it is distressing to hear the divisive rhetoric surrounding this hard-working and significant sector of our population.

True, there are approximately 40,000 Hawaii residents without valid papers (aka out-of-status). The reasons for being out-of-status are many, including the minis-

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terial overstaying of visas, but these immigrants have developed ties to Hawaii, created connections in the community, and have made a life for themselves and their families here.

Immigrants — longtime residents and newcomers alike — pay taxes and contribute to our economy like everyone else. In fact, those out-of-status pay more in taxes than an average U.S. citizen taxpayer. Further, immigrants without legal

U.S. status are not eligible for and do not receive government benefits, such as Social Security, Medicare, SNAP, Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit — all the while contributing to the social safety net.

The truth is the immigrant labor force — both documented and undocumented — is needed in

Hawaii with the tight job market and difficulty in finding enough workers to fill certain positions. Hawaii's demographic changes (fewer births, out-migration and aging population) require immigration to support Social Security and our tax base. Immigrants do valuable, necessary work and provide needed services in Hawaii related to agriculture, tourism and the medical field. Immigrants do not drain limited resources but, instead, contribute to the overall — social, economic and cultural — growth of Hawaii.

Knowing the importance of immigrants to Hawaii, the laws surrounding immigration, while contradictory, outdated and flawed, must still be followed. More than 50,000 Hawaii residents could be eligible for "green cards" and other pathways to citizenship but may not know how to or need legal assistance to do so. Further, paying for a private immigration attorney is cost-prohibitive for most.

There are fewer than a dozen

immigration attorneys statewide who charge low or no fees to provide expert counsel for eligible residents, leaving many without adequate support to seek more secure immigration status.

For the approximately 40,000 out-of-status immigrants, who are at risk of deportation, some may have recourse through asylum petitions or other removal/deportation defense, but these are highly intricate legal matters. The Legal Clinic (TLC), a Hawaii nonpartisan nonprofit, is one of the few organizations in Hawaii that provides free immigration legal services.

The issue of immigration is a complex one not befitting of simplistic, bombastic rhetoric, reducing people to the lowest common denominator to sow fear, discord and chaos. Many of us in Hawaii are foreign-born or have immigrant roots.

Everyone, including immigrants deserve due process, civil rights, dignity and justice. Immigrants need support, understanding and hope during these turbulent times.