

Immigration Policy Principles

A Framework to Strengthen America's Restaurant Workforce

UNDERSTANDING

THE BACKGROUND

Immigration is essential to a resilient, economically viable restaurant industry.

Nearly 1 in 4 people currently working in restaurants were born outside the United States. In 2025, operators needed to fill nearly 900,000 open jobs each month, and staffing was one of their top challenges. With the U.S. labor force projected to grow by less than 4% over the next decade while restaurants add 1.7 million jobs, the industry faces a persistent structural labor gap. The restaurant industry needs a modern immigration system that provides long-term stability for current and future workers. To achieve this, the National Restaurant Association supports comprehensive immigration reform rooted in three core principles.

PRINCIPLE #1

Protecting the Industry's Current Workforce

What This Means: Millions of people who power restaurants today – including Dreamers, long-serving employees with Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and other workers who have lived and worked in the U.S. for years – lack certainty about their legal status. These individuals are essential to restaurant operations and local economies.

WHY IT MATTERS TO RESTAURANTS

Restaurants are the nation's **second-largest private employer, with 15.7 million workers across 1 million locations.**

- Many long-serving employees have advanced to management roles and form the backbone of daily operations.
- Workforce instability disrupts service, increases turnover costs, and threatens business viability.
- Operators overwhelmingly want a stable, legal workforce:
 - **76%** say they would benefit from a program allowing long-serving employees to continue working legally.
 - **77%** believe immigration is good for the restaurant industry.

How To Accomplish This

Bipartisan legislative action providing stability and permanent legal pathways for long-standing workers to stay in the U.S., including Dreamers (DACA recipients) and TPS holders and long-tenured workers with strong community ties and no criminal record.



PRINCIPLE #2:

Fixing the Work Visa System

What This Means: The current work visa system is **outdated, too small to meet demand, and too slow to respond to market needs.** Restaurants need access to legal, year-round workers – not programs designed for seasonal needs. Visa reform would provide operators predictable staffing, reduce hiring gaps, and align the workforce with real-world demand.

WHY IT MATTERS TO RESTAURANTS

- Restaurants are highly labor-intensive – **requiring 11 employees to generate \$1 million in sales**, compared with just 3 employees in a hardware store.
- In 2025, the accommodation and foodservice industries averaged **908,000 monthly job openings.**
- Staffing shortages directly reduce hours, delay expansion, and limit revenue.

PRINCIPLE #3:

Building a Modern Immigration System for the Future

What This Means: Demographic trends—including a declining birthrate, aging population, and fewer teens entering the workforce—mean that **the U.S. labor pool simply cannot meet future industry needs without legal immigration.** A modern immigration system is essential for restaurants to remain economic engines and community cornerstones.

WHY IT MATTERS TO RESTAURANTS

- **By 2036**, the restaurant and foodservice sector will add 1.6 million jobs, but the total U.S. labor force will grow by less than 4% between 2023–2033.
- Restaurants are career catalysts, small-business incubators, and major local tax contributors – **all dependent on a stable workforce.**

How To Accomplish This

Legislative modernization of immigration laws to reduce uncertainty, prevent disruptions, and ensure restaurants can operate at full strength, including:

- **New legal pathways** to meet long-term labor demand and allow new workers to safely and legally join the workforce.
- **Employer-focused compliance tools** must ensure certainty and fairness:
 - Any E-Verify mandate must be part of broader immigration reform and include safe harbor protections for employers, federal preemption, voluntary reverification of existing employees, and phased implementation to allow small businesses additional time to comply.

How To Accomplish This

Modernize and expand legal work visa pathways, allowing restaurant operators to hire workers for positions that remain unfilled despite recruitment of U.S. workers, including:

- **Creation of an H-2C visa** (Essential Workers for Economic Advancement Act) for year-round, non-agricultural roles where chronic shortages exist.
- **Strengthen existing work visa programs by:**
 - Exempting returning H-2B workers from annual caps.
 - Adjusting visa caps to reflect economic conditions.
 - Streamlining processing to reduce bottlenecks.

CONCLUSION

Immigration reform is not abstract policy – it is the foundation of a strong restaurant workforce and a thriving U.S. economy. Protecting today's employees, modernizing visa programs, and building a forward-looking system will help the restaurant industry grow, create jobs, and continue serving as cultural and economic anchors in every community.

This three-part solution ensures that reforms work in practice – supporting employees, operators, and the millions of guests who rely on the hospitality industry every day.

SCAN TO
GET MORE
INFORMATION

