

Opinion: Dear Santa, bring immigrants

Dear Santa,

I know most letters you get are from kids. So let me start by saying there is no toy that I need.

But there is something I want for Christmas—not for myself but for my state.

What does California really need? We're a relatively rich place with nearly 40 million residents, which you might think would be more than enough people. Except that it's not.



Joe Mathews

The statistics show that California faces shortages of the kinds of people its future requires: children, skilled workers, farmworkers, construction workers, doctors, teachers, entrepreneurs, engineers, and college graduates. (This is only a partial list. Still, check it twice.)

The fastest way to address these shortages is by attracting more immigrants. While more than one-quarter of Californians are foreign-born, we've had so little immigration over the last decade that we face a shortage of new immigrants, too.

And it's getting harder to attract more. Even though California is nice to immigrants, our federal government naughtily spreads anti-immigrant bigotry, makes it harder for

immigrants to enter the country, and deports as many current immigrants as possible.

Which is why I turn to you, St. Nick. With your high-volume delivery system and your ability to slip unnoticed past U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Santa Claus is our last, best hope for getting the immigrants California needs.

Can you send a million? Or 2 million?

I know you read in the papers that politicians blame our country's economic problems on an excess of immigrants. But that's fake news.

We actually need many more immigrants. Nationally, the number of job openings is at an all-time record. In California, some employers are so desperate for workers that they are considering moving out of state.

This is the nasty paradox of California's success: Growth has made it hard for people to stay. The high cost of living has created a consistent out-migration of residents, with 50,000-plus more people leaving California each year than arriving from other states. This domestic out-migration is pronounced among the younger working-class people who should be the backbone of the state's future.

The result: lack of workers. With immigration's decline, most California construction firms report shortages of workers, which—in a vicious cycle—causes costly delays that make housing more expensive. The lack of immigrants has decimated the agricultural workforce, which consists primarily of foreign-born workers. And with so much of California's entrepreneurial culture deriving from immigration (40 percent of L.A. business owners are foreign-born), it's unsurprising that the state's rate of business formation has slowed in the last decade.

Long term, the shortage of workers is most worrisome in

healthcare; currently, there aren't enough people to take care of California's two fastest-growing demographics, the disabled and the old. All California regions except the Bay Area and Sacramento face doctor shortages, particularly in primary care. What looks like a medical shortage is really an immigrant shortage, since more than one-third of our doctors are foreign-born. The same dynamic holds in California's science and engineering sectors, in which 42 percent of workers are immigrants.

The Public Policy Institute of California has estimated that by 2030 the state will have 1.1 million fewer college graduates than its economic needs will require. The current immigration levels aren't high enough to make up the difference. "Much larger increases in international migration will be necessary for the supply of highly educated workers to meet the demand," PPIC concluded.

If not for the immigrants we already have, these shortages would be much worse.

California's most reliable method for producing more people—having more babies—isn't working well. The birth rate in the state is now below the replacement rate, and major coastal counties have seen steep declines in their number of children. Attracting more immigrants would help reverse that.

Now, I know that Santa tries not to get involved in politics and policy. And yes, Californians need to invest more in our current residents. But that takes time and money, and the problems I'm talking about are in the here and now. And I'm sure you've seen these shortages firsthand. Everywhere I go in California this time of year, you're there, talking to average people.

And I don't have to remind you that you're an immigrant yourself. (St. Nicholas started out as a 4th-century Greek saint in what is now southern Turkey).

Kris, I realize that your pack of gifts is already heavy, and that you don't want to overtax your renewable fuel source, those eight tiny reindeer. But remember the story of Christmas. If you can find the magic to get the people our state needs on your sleigh, we should be able to make sure that there's room for them at the Hotel California.

Feliz Navidad,

Joe Mathews

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.