California needs an integrated plan on immigration (see Utah)

Utah - really? Has the so-called Beehive State just outpaced the Golden State in response to immigrants?

Recently, the Utah Legislature made it clear that if the federal government will not take action, the state will make changes itself - for better or for worse.

The better: legislation that would issue undocumented residents currently in the state two-year permits to continue to work there - as well as set up mechanisms for a continuing guest worker program. The worse: a commitment to enforcement that echoes - albeit in a less draconian fashion - Arizona's controversial 2010 law. Large and likely to be balanced by the balance the Utah Compact - a five-point statement of principles adopted by business, civic and religious leaders intended to create a more civil conversation about immigrant communities and immigration policy.

The inclusion of business in the compact has been critical, helping to sway conservative voices to understand the need for immigrant labor. Also helpful matters has been the Mormon Church, whose tradition of missionary work abroad might lead to a more welcoming approach to the stranger. Finally, immigrant advocates have also reached out to unlikely allies, adopting a measured tone and focusing on issues of humane treatment that have broad support.

While we concur with critics from both the left and the right that immigration policy is better tackled at the national level, Congress seems paralyzed, and the daily life of immigrants is often largely determined by local and state policies.

So how long will California let a red state outdo us on such a blue issue? The California Legislature is preoccupied with budget matters, but waiting on the shelf are a number of low-cost ideas, including laws that would keep English-language learning standards high, ensure that state agencies appropriately translate materials and allow local law enforcement to more easily opt out of a federal "Secure Communities" program that requires expensive checks of immigration status and may undermine community policing.

More expensive in the short run is the California Dream Act, a bill by Assemblyman Mike Cudillo, D-Los Angeles, that would allow undocumented students to access state financial aid. On the other hand, the measure would build on the investment already made on those students' K-12 education, preparing for the day when a federal Dream Act passes - something supported by more than three-quarters of Californians, according to recent USC-Los Angeles Times polls - and these better educated students can contribute more effectively to the state economy.

Something the governor could do more quickly - and cheaply - is to establish an office for Immigrant Integration. Such an office could be a clearinghouse for service providers hoping to help immigrants naturalize, learn English and know their rights. It could also be a vehicle for community organizations that want to help native-born residents seeking to partner with and support newcomers. This is not a new idea - the county of Santa Clara has done it with great success, hosting citizenship days, educational forums, cultural proficiency initiatives and the like. Why not go statewide?

Local agencies also have a role. Recently, the Los Angeles Police Department agreed to modify a policy under which unlicensed drivers had their cars impounded if they went through a DUI checkpoint - even if they weren't drinking. Under the new policy, safe and sober drivers can call the registered and licensed owner to come get the car, saving migrants thousands of dollars in fees and letting police focus on real crimes. Police Chief Charlie Beck called it "the right thing to do" - and it's the smart thing to do not just in Los Angeles but throughout California.

But just as in Utah, a more enlightened and balanced approach in California will come only from a more civil dialogue and collective leadership from business, faith and immigrant leaders.

California, we all know, ain't Utah. The share of California's foreign-born is falling - we are increasingly home to what demographer Dowell Myers calls a "home-grown generation" rather than new arrivals. Still, more than one-quarter of all Californians are immigrants, just about half of all our children have at least one immigrant parent, and the long-term future of the state depends on whether these children and their immigrant parents are able to realize their economic and social potential.

California has always prided itself on being on the cutting edge of innovation and inclusion. Let's keep that reputation.

To learn more about the Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, go to: http://cii.usc.edu.