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H-1B visa revamp could drain Southern California's skilled-worker pool

by [Ben Bergman](#)

February 01, 05:00 AM

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Silicon Valley companies are big users of H-1B visas. Getty Images

The Trump administration is considering a review of the H-1B program, which provides visas for high-skilled foreign workers, [according to a draft memo first reported on by Bloomberg News](#) and obtained by KPCC.

[California has by far the most positions eligible for H-1B visas in the U.S.](#), most of which are in Silicon Valley. But small and medium-sized tech companies in Southern California could still be impacted if the federal cap on visas is reduced from its current level of 85,000 or the qualifications are changed, according to Kevin Klowden, director the Milken Institute's California Center.

“The pool for skilled domestic workers is already tight,” said Klowden.

“The biggest immediate impact from a negative standpoint would be the small to midsize growing firms who are competing with talented college and grad school graduates who are foreign students where the competition for these skills are global,” said Klowden. “These people would not be able to be hired and would end up going to their home countries.”

Trump has said he wants American companies to hire American workers instead of foreign ones. [The H-1B program has also been criticized for abuses.](#)

But Rita Sostrin, an L.A.-based immigration attorney, says there just aren’t enough U.S. workers with the skills in science, technology, engineering and math that companies need.

“It’s the high-tech industries and the sciences that rely on H-1B visas to continue driving the economy forward,” said Sostrin. She points out that H-1B workers need a bachelor's degree or higher to qualify.

Trump’s exact plans for the program aren't clear. Sostrin hopes he will reconsider.

"I'm hoping this executive order will not go through or will be amended to the point where we can make sense of it."

[One House member has proposed](#) steeply raising the minimum salary H-1B workers need to earn to \$130,000 from its current level of \$60,000 a year as a way of discouraging companies from hiring foreign workers. [Rep. Darrell Issa has also proposed changes.](#)

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