

## **In targeting undocumented workers, E-Verify could decimate Florida's economy. Say No, Gov. DeSantis | Editorial**

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E-Verify is the very bad idea that just won't die. Instead, if the Florida Legislature approves the misguided initiative, it will be lethal to the state's business community, its agriculture, hospitality and construction industries and the employees they need to hire to keep Florida's economic engines humming.

If E-Verify comes to Florida, businesses will be required to use this web-based system of the federal government to check workers' identities to confirm that they are able to work legally. This is what E-Verify is really all about, targeting undocumented immigrants — the ones who do the jobs so many native-born Americans will not.

Obviously, undocumented immigrants, indeed, are here illegally. For the past seven years, though, most of them have overstayed their visas. According to the Center for Migration Studies of New York, from 2016-2017, people who overstayed their visas accounted for 62 percent of the newly undocumented, while 38 percent had crossed a border illegally.

But the Trump administration's hysteria over the undocumented remains firmly rooted in its racist rhetoric that targets brown and black immigrants, legal or no.

But instead of leading on comprehensive immigration reform that injects common sense, fairness and compassion into the process, the administration's hardline policies have led to inhumane, scattershot enforcement, from separating children from adults at the border, to threatening "sanctuary cities" with financial penalties, to deporting men and women who served this country in the military, to ICE raids that have swept up the legal and the undocumented alike. And most congressional Republicans have played along.

So it's a shame, though not a surprise, that Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis is intent on bringing E-Verify to Florida.

E-Verify has been around since 1996, growing in popularity as our immigration debate has heated up. Several states have signed on, including South Carolina, Arizona and Mississippi. Employers have to run new workers' identity documents through E-Verify, then wait — and wait — for the federal government's OK to keep them on the payroll.

But E-Verify's flaws, and human nature, negate any potential benefits, which are very few. The first problem is that the system doesn't check workers' immigration status. It only checks the documents that they present to employers.

However, there are those who use the identities of relatives who are here legally. Others, unfortunately, present stolen identities. If they can evade e-Verify, what's the point?

The second problem is that many employers don't even bother to use it, state mandates aside. Mississippi's experience is a warning sign. Recent ICE raids at several poultry plants ensnared 680 undocumented immigrants who should have been red-flagged by E-Verify, but weren't.

And third, E-Verify has a 12 percent error rate for "false positive" results; that is, nailing a naturalized citizen as illegal and, therefore, ineligible. Any one of these failures alone, should be a deal-breaker. Combined, they show the costly folly of E-Verify and should end all consideration immediately.

Florida's business community is so concerned about the ramifications of E-Verify that several leaders, including many from South Florida, signed an open letter, sponsored by IMPAC Fund, sent to state Senate President Bill Galvano, House Speaker Jose Oliva and the governor, urging them to reject it resolutely:

"E-Verify ... would be a disaster for Florida's economy. With record low unemployment and staggering worker shortages in the hospitality and agriculture sectors, imposing mandatory E-Verify would only further hold back the growth of our economy. According to data from the Cato Institute, E-Verify could jeopardize the jobs of 1.1 million U.S. citizens and lawfully present Floridians, and cost Florida employers \$4.7 billion to replace lawfully present workers that receive false disqualification. Mandating a flawed and costly system will devastate our economy."

If DeSantis and the Legislature care about our state, these frightening estimates will be a deal breaker for them, too.