

The Daily Local (dailylocal.com), Serving Chester County, PA

News

Pa. weighing effects of tougher immigration rules

Proponents of legislation say illegal immigrants cost state taxpayers \$1 billion a year

Thursday, September 1, 2011

By Eric Boehm, PA Independent

HARRISBURG — The economic impact of Pennsylvania's illegal immigrant community is at the center of proposed legislation by some Republicans who want the state to join Arizona and others, which recently have cracked down on illegal immigration.

Proponents of the bills say illegal immigration directly affects the three largest chunks of the state's discretionary spending: public education, public welfare and corrections. Opponents say illegal immigrants are not the cause of the state's economic problems and evicting them would be bad for the state's economy.

The bills in the state House package include:

Requiring photo identification for public benefits;

Directing businesses to use a federal registration system known as E-Verify to ensure workers are American citizens;

Allowing law enforcement to check for photo identification randomly, similar to controversial legislation passed in Arizona last year.

While the federal government is responsible for controlling and regulating immigration, Republican state lawmakers nationwide are starting to take the issue into their own hands, citing a lack of responsiveness from Washington.

"Every state in the nation is affected by illegal immigration when we're talking about federal taxpayer money," said state Rep. Daryl Metcalfe, R-Butler, chairman of the House State Government Committee and a leading sponsor of the package.

He said the state's illegal immigrant population costs taxpayers about \$1 billion each year, citing information from the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which supports stronger immigration policy.

But those provisions would hurt some small Pennsylvania businesses that rely on immigrant workers.

Kay Hollabaugh, whose family owns Hollabaugh Bros. Inc. Fruit Farm and Market in Adams County, said the new restrictions — particularly the use of the E-Verify system — would likely put the 500-acre farm out of business.

"We are already stretched painfully thin simply keeping up with the mountains of paperwork and regulations that already exist," Hollabaugh said. "The workers that I employ, be they legal or not, pay into our tax base. They eat in our

restaurants and shop at our stores."

The Hollabaugh Bros. farm pays its seasonal workers at least minimum wage, and most workers make more than \$8 per hour, said Hollabaugh, with the potential to make up to \$20 per hour when being paid by the piece for certain harvests. The minimum wage in Pennsylvania is \$7.25 per hour, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

Hollabaugh said immigrant workers respond to the farm's job postings, because they are willing to perform the physical labor required on a fruit farm. The farm employs between 15 and 20 seasonal workers.

About 150,000 of Pennsylvania's 12 million residents are estimated to be illegal immigrants, with about 110,000 of them having jobs, according to the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington, D.C.-based policy center.

Steven Camarota, director of research for the Center for Immigration Studies, told the House State Government Committee on Wednesday that if the bills became law, they would encourage illegal immigrants to return to their native countries or settle in other states, freeing up jobs for unemployed Pennsylvanians.

And when it comes to jobs Americans refuse to do — as Hollabaugh alleged — there are other solutions, suggested Camarota.

"Employers who want access to cheap labor may argue forcefully that they need the workers, but the fact remains that improving compensation and working conditions is the primary way they should deal with this problem," Camarota said.

Daniel Griswold, an expert on trade and immigration with the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank based in Washington, D.C., said studies conducted in North Carolina and Texas found that illegal immigrants impose additional costs on state and local governments, but they are net contributors at the state level when factoring in taxes.

Griswold said he shared the frustration of state lawmakers who are displeased with the federal government's failure to address immigration reform, but said congressional action was the best way to fix the problems.

The bill in the package that has seen action is a measure from state Senate President Joe Scarnati, R-Jefferson, to require photo identification before anyone in Pennsylvania can collect public benefits.

That bill has passed the state Senate on three occasions — including this year — only to be stopped by the Democratic-controlled state House. Now, Republicans control the House, but they may not have full support in the state Senate.

Metcalf said recent federal policy on immigration was "disturbing" to him, including ending deportations for non-violent illegal immigrants. He said that was equal to "backdoor amnesty."

State Rep. Tim Briggs, R-Montgomery, agreed that reforms should be made at the federal level to correct the immigration issue, but Congress has not acted.

"If we rush into this, we're going to hurt many of our constituents in the rush to point fingers for the problems that we see," Briggs said.

URL: <http://www.dailylocal.com/articles/2011/09/01/news/srv0000013538587.prt>

© 2011 dailylocal.com, a **Journal Register** Property