

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Bills would tighten Pennsylvania's immigration enforcement

By Brad Bumsted
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Monday, September 5, 2011

HARRISBURG -- It's illegal and immoral to take resources from state taxpayers and give them to people without proper documentation, a national Tea Party leader says.

H. John Stahl, a former Pennsylvania legislator from Berks County and founding member of the Tea Party Immigration Coalition, is pushing for legislation in Pennsylvania and other states to ensure that illegal aliens don't get taxpayer-paid benefits such as welfare, take jobs from Pennsylvanians or have an opportunity to commit crimes.

"There is nothing in the U.S. Constitution that lends itself to the taxpayers being taxed for the benefit of illegal aliens," Stahl told the House State Government Committee last week.

A package of bills pending before the committee would require proof of citizenship to obtain public benefits; penalize employers who hire illegal aliens; require employers to use the federal E-Verify systems, in which applicants are checked against 455 million records; and let state and local police enforce immigration laws.

The "misguided proposals" would "harm and even criminalize" immigrants and communities, said Pamela Linares, of Community Insight, once an immigrant and now a legal resident.

"Instead of targeting immigrants, Pennsylvania's Legislature should work toward finding solutions to our broken federal immigration system," Linares testified.

Rep. Daryl Metcalfe, R-Cranberry, the committee chairman, said members will meet after the House returns to session the last week of this month and debate which bills they want to make a priority or amend.

During the first half of 2011, 1,592 bills dealing with immigration were introduced in the 50 states -- up 16 percent over the first half of 2010, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures in Denver. As of June 30, more than 150 bills had passed in 40 states. Eighteen states now have the E-Verify system for employers that Pennsylvania is considering.

"Pennsylvanians don't want to spend \$1.4 billion a year on people who

shouldn't be in the state in the first place," Metcalfe said.

Metcalfe based his figure on information provided to the committee by the Federation for American Immigration Reform.

Jack Martin, special projects director for that group, testified that Pennsylvania's illegal alien population is about 140,000. The \$1.4 billion annual cost is from K-12 schooling for children of immigrants, English language instruction, and free or reduced-price school meals. Other costs include law enforcement, incarceration and general government expenses for transportation and safety.

Pennsylvania faces many challenges, but the "inflow of hardworking immigrants isn't one of them," said Daniel Griswold, director of the Cato Institute's center for trade policy studies.

Pennsylvania ranks 30th among the states with foreign-born residents. In 2009, about 5.5 percent of residents were immigrants, compared with 12.5 percent nationally, he said. Pennsylvania ranks 40th among the states with illegal immigrants at 1.3 percent of the population, compared with 4 percent nationwide, said Griswold, citing figures from the Pew Hispanic Center.

But states such as Pennsylvania have no choice but to enact legislation minimizing adverse effects of the federal government's lack of enforcement, said Michael Bekesha, an attorney at Judicial Watch in Washington.

"Although Americans overwhelmingly want the rule of law enforced, the federal government continues to look for ways to avoid enforcing the law," Bekesha testified.

Kay Hollabaugh said she employs "hardworking and polite" people to pick fruit at her family's Adams County fruit farm. Many domestic applicants won't take the jobs, she said. "I have grown very resentful of the attitude that immigrant laborers have no place in our country," Hollabaugh said.

If broad legislation becomes law, there's little chance her business can survive, she said. "We do not reduce wages" or tolerate "adverse working conditions," she said.

Hollabaugh contends the E-Verify system is flawed and will create nothing but headaches for small businesses.

Said Hollabaugh, "If we are required to use E-Verify system and if our workers are found to be illegal, where is the work force that is ready to step to the plate to harvest our fruits and vegetables?"

Brad Bumsted can be reached at bbumsted@tribweb.com or 717-787-1405.