

Bill would get tough on illegal immigrants

By **ERIC BOEHM**

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HARRISBURG — The economic impact of Pennsylvania's illegal immigrant community is at the center of legislation proposed by some Republicans who want to join Arizona and other states in cracking 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; and allow 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.

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, told the House State Government Committee 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.

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 unhappy 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 state 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.

