

The Daily Iowan

Experts say Community ID's not effective

By Ben Marks

April 22, 2015

To cheers and whistles, the Johnson County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to create a Johnson County community-ID program two weeks ago.

With the vote, the county joined a small handful of other communities around the nation — including San Francisco and more recently New York — that have created similar programs, which offer a legal form of identification without requiring proof of citizenship or immigration status.

Lack of proof of citizenship has caused the most controversy surrounding the cards.

“We should be making it difficult to be in the country illegally, not easier,” said Ira Mehlam, the media director for the Federation for American Immigration Reform.

By making it easier and safer for undocumented people to access services, Mehlam argued, it makes it easier for them to go undetected by the authorities.

Without a state-issued ID like a driver’s license, people often can’t open a bank account, rent an apartment, report a crime to the police, cash a check, or pick their children up from school, Johnson County Supervisor Rod Sullivan said.

Often these activities, such as picking a child up from school, have to happen, Sullivan said. So in order to do it without an ID, a parent may break the law, perhaps by sneaking into the school or getting a false ID.

Instead, Sullivan said, these unnecessarily dangerous actions can be avoided by simply using a community ID.

“Whether you think someone should be here or not, that’s federal policy,” Sullivan said. “All we want to know is, if they’re going to be here, can we figure out who they are?”

Mehlman said he doesn’t see the benefit of giving undocumented immigrants access to these services.

“One of the arguments is it makes it easier for them to open bank accounts so they can cash paychecks,” he said, “Well, federal law says it’s illegal for them to be working in the United States, and the reason it’s illegal for them to be working is someone else might be looking for that job.”

However, what exactly the long-term benefits of the IDs are however, or if they even have any, are uncertain.

Alex Nowrasteh, immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute said while there are many anecdotes about the card’s benefits, he cannot say whether the cards are indeed beneficial or not because of a lack of research on the subject.

“There are lots of anecdotes but no statistical data,” he said.

Muzaffar Chishti, the director of the Migration Policy Institute’s office at New York University, said he is also unaware of any data surrounding any of the municipal ID cards nationally, and many of the card’s benefits can’t be reliably be measured.

New Haven, Connecticut, issued the first municipal ID cards in the country in 2007, but an employee at New Haven Vital Statistics said they did not track any data having to do with the impact of the cards.

“Local ID programs are things that sound nice and let a lot of unauthorized immigrants know the local government won’t cooperate with feds in enforcing immigration laws,” Nowrasteh said. “But besides that I don’t think it will have much of an impact in any way.”

In addition to not carrying any major benefits besides a welcoming message, Nowrasteh said he believes there are many other ways to send that same message while costing less money.

Since 1979, he said, Los Angeles has had a policy prohibiting police officers from asking about immigration status, which he said has helped the police cooperate with undocumented immigrants — one of the main goals of the cards — but much less expensively.

The estimated cost to create the ID program in Johnson County is around \$20,000.

Both Chishti and Nowrasteh agreed allowing undocumented immigrants to obtain state driver’s licenses would have a much larger beneficial effect on their lives but acknowledged that was a state, rather than county, issue.

“Driver’s licenses are huge,” Chishti said, “They are very important, because it not only affects your ability to drive, but it affects your ability to take certain jobs.”

On Jan. 1, in a highly anticipated move, California became the 10th state to provide licenses to undocumented immigrants.

Chisti said the other state changes, which would majorly affect the lives of the undocumented, would be allowing them to qualify for in-state college tuition.

Given the lack of political will or resources, Chisti said, it is unlikely the large number of undocumented immigrants in the United States — 12 million, according to the U.S Census Bureau — will be removed.

“If we are not removing them then, and they are residents of a community for a large number of years, then it makes sense to have them integrated in basic functions of society,” he said.