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Iowa Republicans pick borders and bureaucracy over businesses

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Legislature's latest anti-immigrant proposal would bind businesses with burdensome regulation

Which do Republicans love more — unregulated business or borders? Iowa Republicans this legislative session are siding with the imaginary lines we draw around countries.

An Iowa Senate subcommittee this week gave initial approval to a bill requiring businesses to run new hires through a federal immigration verification database. If passed, Iowa would join a small group of states mandating all or most new workers be checked through E-Verify, intended to keep unauthorized immigrants from working U.S. jobs.

However, the federal immigration surveillance system is cumbersome and error-prone. No constituent speaking at this week's subcommittee hearing supported the legislation, the **Iowa Torch reported**. In effect, it is an unfunded mandate on private companies.

“We don't look at this as an immigration issue. This bill we really see it ... through the lens of business as being a mandate imposed on businesses,” an Iowa Association of Business and Industry lobbyist told legislators, per the Iowa Torch.

Proponents of E-Verify say it is highly accurate and free to use. Neither is true.

The system's purported mismatch rate of well under 1 percent might sound impressive, but on a statewide basis, it's not. If all of Iowa's 1.5 million workers were checked and even one-tenth of a percent were erroneous hits, 1,500 Iowans would be falsely flagged. Although the proposed law only affects new hires, that's a snapshot of the possible long-term impact.

E-Verify is even worse at flagging actual unauthorized workers. The system catches fewer than one in six undocumented workers, according to a **2019 report** by Cato Institute immigration analyst David Bier, who calls E-Verify “one of the largest government surveillance programs in the United States.”

So, E-Verify does a bad job, but at what cost? Businesses pay twice.

The federal government spends hundreds of millions of dollars to maintain the system, paid for by taxes. While it's supposedly free for businesses to use, the setup and compliance expenses are significant. Under a national E-Verify mandate, small businesses would **pay \$2.6 billion** for the free service, according to a decade-old analysis by Bloomberg. That figure could be even higher now.

Even if the program were accurate and truly free to use, it would be a disaster for human rights and the economy. Immigrants are vital to the culture and workforce in quickly aging, slowly growing states such as Iowa.

The U.S. workforce includes 7.6 million unauthorized immigrants, **Pew Research Center reported** in 2019. In Iowa, many of them fill essential roles in the agriculture and food processing industries. About 6 percent of Iowa's population is foreign-born, including both documented and undocumented immigrants.

Expanding federal immigration surveillance in Iowa is not only a ploy to crack down on immigrants. It also infringes on entrepreneurs' basic rights to do business with whoever they want, including employees who happened to be born on the wrong side of a river.

You can't really be pro-business while you restrict employers' rights to hire. You can't honestly say you're for the free market when you impose burdensome regulations on the labor market.