

Legislators Eye Tougher Immigration Rules

By

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RALEIGH (AP) - North Carolina lawmakers are considering whether to delve further into the nation's immigration debate by making it more uncomfortable for illegal immigrants to live in the state. The federal government, the courts and legislative colleagues, however, could make strict rules like those approved in other states harder to enact in North Carolina.

After some incremental changes in recent years under Democratic rule, the new Republican majority at the Legislature this year debated several immigration-related bills, girding the hopes of anti-illegal immigration advocates. One significant law got on the books -- requiring local governments and employers with at least 25 workers to use a federal program to screen new hires for their immigration status.

Pending legislation can still be considered next May, and now a House committee looking at how the state should respond to illegal immigration is meeting to recommend more changes. The Pew Hispanic Center said North Carolina ranks ninth in population among the states with what it calls 325,000 unauthorized immigrants, defined as foreign-born non-U.S. citizens who aren't legal immigrants.

"Is it our role to be involved?" asked Rep. Sarah Stevens, R-Surry, a committee member, after the first meeting. "I think that's what this committee is looking at -- what can we do?"

Not much, argue opponents of laws they say hurt all immigrants, not just those that are living in the shadows for fear of deportation. They said immigration policy is the federal government's purview and additional restrictions in the name of public safety or taxpayer savings are misguided and single out Latinos.

Lawmakers also could have second thoughts about dramatic changes because the U.S. Justice Department has sued over wide-ranging immigration enforcement laws in Arizona, Alabama, Utah and South Carolina. Judges have blocked portions of them from being carried out. The U.S. Supreme Court could ultimately decide on their legality.

"I'm a bit surprised that North Carolina would want to go down that road," said Deborah Weissman, a professor at the University of North Carolina law school in Chapel Hill who studies immigration issues. "It does seem to have some indication that some individuals in the Legislature would prefer to rid the state of immigrants."

The first meeting of the House study committee last week attracted a tense, standing-room only crowd in a Legislative Building hearing room. Several dozen members of a Charlotte-based group opposed to state immigration laws sat or stood next to about 30 people from the group North Carolinians for Immigration Reform and Enforcement. They heard presentations from two sheriffs about participating in federal programs designed for deputies to process jailed criminal suspects who are determined to be in the country illegally.

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NCFIRE wants the Legislature to complete passage of bills that cleared one legislative chamber this year, including one that would no longer consider acceptable a photo identification card issued by the Mexican consulate as proof to receive government services and to determine identity.

"What we would like ultimately is Arizona-type or Alabama-type immigration laws enforced in North Carolina," NCFIRE President James Johnson said. A report from the Federation for American Immigration Reform estimated illegal immigration costs governments in the state more than \$2 billion in expenditures annually. "We simply can't afford it anymore," Johnson said.

Alabama's immigration law allows police to check a person's immigration status during a traffic stop, makes it a felony for an illegal immigrant to do business with the state and prevents courts from enforcing contracts involving illegal immigrants. Following complaints the law was tarnishing the state's image, Alabama's governor said Friday he would work with legislators on some changes.

A member of Jesus Ministry Inc., a faith-based group that bused supporters from Charlotte to Raleigh, mentioned at a rally that a 2006 study shows how the state's Hispanic residents contributed more than \$9 billion a year to the state's economy.

Instead of embracing the Latino community, members say, the Legislature is trying to make them scapegoats for the state's ills ahead of a big campaign year.

"This is a political game that's being played every time that we have elections," said Jesus Ministry Executive Director Maudia Melendez, who immigrated to the U.S. from Nicaragua in the mid-1970s.

States have been assembling their own sets of immigration restrictions in response to the inability of Washington to rework what most consider a broken immigration system.

"There's enormous frustration that Congress isn't doing their job," said Ann Morse, director of the Immigrant Policy Project at the National Conference of State Legislatures. She said states probably would stay away from passing legislation like Arizona did until final courts rule on its legality. Resolution may not occur until 2013.

In North Carolina, the fact that the Senate didn't participate in the committee with the House shows Senate Republican leaders are less interested in the topic. Any bill also could face the veto pen of Democratic Gov. Beverly Perdue.

Looking at federal immigration issues will be a challenge, a committee member said.

"That's a perplexing question," said first-term Rep. John Faircloth, R-Guilford, a former High Point police chief. "To think we'd ever try to do anything to make our state less desirable for anyone is tough to deal with."