

Local government can't fix federal failings on immigration



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The federal government's failure to craft a workable immigration policy continues to cause state and local governments to waste time and effort on unfeasible proposals for stemming the flow of undocumented immigrants.

It's a catastrophic failure at the federal level with long-term ramifications that should outrage every citizen.

Two Western North Carolina lawmakers are behind the latest proposition, a state bill similar to one introduced by U.S. Rep. Heath Shuler, D-Waynesville, in the U.S. House. The state bill, backed by Rep. Charles Thomas, R-Buncombe and Sen. John Snow, D-Cherokee, would require screening through a Department of Homeland Security database for all job candidates in North Carolina.

Businesses that failed to screen applicants through the E-Verify program would risk losing their business licenses.

While Shuler's bill could have been a reasonable first step toward addressing the problem of illegal immigration at the federal level, the state bill, if passed, promises to do nothing more than damage the state's economy and create a hardship for businesses.

Immigration is a federal issue and can only be effectively dealt with at the federal level. Shuler's bill just a start

As we said months ago when Shuler introduced his bill, the vast majority of those who come to the United States illegally cross the border without documentation because there is a demand for their labor but no legal way for them to enter the country.

No bill that fails to address that reality will solve the problem of illegal immigration. Shuler's bill was not adequate. It was a beginning, as we said at the time. The federal government has the power and authority to go further and create a way for the up to 12 million illegal immigrants already in the country to achieve legal status. It has the power to create a visa program for guest workers with an adequate number of slots, one that doesn't essentially turn them into indentured servants.

State lawmakers don't have that power. They do, however, have the power to cause economic hardship for state businesses.

A 2006 UNC study concluded that the North Carolina Hispanic population contributes more than \$9 billion to the state's economy. Undocumented workers are about half the Hispanic population.

In 2004, Hispanics provided 51,931 workers for the construction industry in North Carolina, 18,400 agriculture workers, 8,041 cooks and food preparation workers and 4,748 food processing workers, according to a study by the Frank Hawkins Kenan

Institute of Private Enterprise at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Their buying power amounted to \$8.4 billion or an average of \$84 million in each of North Carolina's 100 counties.

The vast majority of those who come to the United States illegally are decent people willing to work hard. They come from countries with failed economies, desperate for a chance to provide a better life for their families.

The unemployment rate has gone up slightly during the current economic slowdown, but at about 5 percent, it remains at what's considered near full employment. Illegal immigrants are not taking jobs from North Carolina workers, they are satisfying a demand for labor that is not and probably cannot be met by North Carolinians and immigrants here legally.

Status quo unacceptable

That said, no one would argue in favor of the status quo. In private conversations with Shuler, area health, law enforcement and school officials said the continuing influx of illegal immigrants is placing an unsustainable drain on their resources, a spokesman in Shuler's office said.

The millions of immigrants in the United States illegally create a vulnerable underclass susceptible to victimization. They cannot legally drive on the state's highways or purchase insurance. Their shadowy status outside the law undermines respect for the law and sows the seeds of instability.

As the controversy over whether North Carolina's community colleges and universities should deny access to students who entered the country illegally demonstrates, the lack of a functioning federal immigration policy leaves states in a no-win limbo, unable to make decisions in their long-term best interest without fear of flaunting federal law.

A workable immigration policy is critical to national security, national and local economies and respect for the law.

The ongoing failure of the U.S. Congress to legislate a solution can only be characterized as the most unpardonable failure to do the job they were elected to do.

But that doesn't mean state and local governments should rush into the breach.