

Missouri to curb illegal immigration

Dos Mundos

Contributed by Edie R. Lambert

Thursday, 22 May 2008

Pressured by Governor Matt Blunt to pass immigration legislation or return for a special session, Missouri lawmakers approved measures last Friday aimed at discouraging illegal immigration.

The legislation, a compromise bill hammered out in conference committee late on Thursday, cracks down on undocumented immigrants, employers who hire them, and municipalities in which they live.

The bill bars immigrants in the country illegally from obtaining a driver's license or receiving public benefits, such as government-subsidized, low-cost housing or food stamps.

It requires state agencies administering public benefits to report undocumented immigrants to federal immigration authorities; orders commercial driver's license tests be administered only in English without the aid of translators; authorizes local judges to deny bail for undocumented immigrants; criminalizes transporting or concealing an undocumented immigrant; orders local law enforcement agencies to verify the legal status of prisoners through the U.S.

Department of Homeland Security within 48 hours of arrest; requires the Missouri State Highway Patrol to seek special federal immigration training; prohibits local governments from enacting sanctuary policies; and requires cities to cooperate with federal immigration authorities.

Under the bill, which authorizes the attorney general to investigate such cases, businesses that misclassify their workers as "contractors"; instead of "employees" can be fined up to \$50,000. Public employers, businesses with government contracts exceeding \$5,000, or businesses that receive state loans or tax breaks will be required to use E-Verify, the federal government's employment authorization program to verify the legal status of workers.

Employers not required to use E-Verify would have to start using it if they are caught unknowingly hiring undocumented immigrants. Businesses found knowingly hiring illegal immigrants would lose their licenses.

Beginning August 28, 2009, businesses that contract to work on public works projects must provide construction safety training approved by the U.S. Labor Department.

Approved by the Senate 27-7 and the House 136-12, the measure now goes to the governor, who praised the General

Assembly in a press statement released on Monday.

Immigration legislation has been a priority for Blunt, who has enacted new policies aimed at discouraging illegal immigration in Missouri. Last fall, he ordered the Missouri State Highway Patrol to check the immigration status of everyone officers arrested and the Missouri Department of Economic Development to check the legal status of workers employed by businesses that get state tax incentives.

Last week, he announced that his initiatives to fight illegal immigration have led to the detainment of 250 illegal immigrants in Missouri.

Governor Blunt had threatened to call lawmakers back for a special session if they failed to pass immigration reform measures before the General Assembly adjourned on Friday.