New Checks Planned for Illegal Workers and Their Employers

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WASHINGTON - Employers in the United States will soon be given a more reliable way to verify the immigration or citizenship status of new hires, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said Thursday. That system will then be followed up with tougher enforcement of immigration laws, he said.

"We owe the employers tools to verify their employees in a prompt and accurate manner," Mr. Chertoff said during a news conference. "Once we give them those tools, though, they owe it to us to use those tools, and if they don't, we then have to sanction them."

Mr. Chertoff provided little detail on how the system would work, saying only that an announcement would be made in the next several weeks.

But senior officials at Homeland Security said one change would probably involve revising the notification that employers receive when a Social Security number or other identification information provided by a new hire is rejected as invalid by the Social Security Administration.

"Employers have not been provided with a good explanation of what they need to do and what is expected of them within eyes of the law" when they receive such a notice, said Russ Knocke, a Homeland Security spokesman.

Homeland Security also wants to expand the use of an Internet-based system, called Basic Pilot Project, which allows employers to use information provided by a job applicant to quickly verify the person's immigration or citizenship status.

Today, only about 5,000 of the nation's approximately seven million employers use Basic Pilot, according to Citizenship and Immigration Services, which operates the program. The Bush administration is considering mandating use of the system, Mr. Chertoff said.

Such a move might require legislation, and even then would take months if not years to initiate because a more robust computer system would be needed to handle the enormous surge in use, Homeland Security officials said Thursday.

In addition, the existing Basic Pilot system is vulnerable to abuse by job applicants who have assumed false identities, a recent report by the Government Accountability Office said.

Few employers in the United States now face fines or criminal charges for hiring illegal immigrants. Between 1999 and 2004, the number of notices of intent to fine an employer dropped from 417 to fewer than 5, the G.A.O. report said.
The decline was attributed, in part, to Homeland Security's focus on potential terrorism threats rather than on a more general immigration crackdown.

Mr. Chertoff said he recognized that his department must expand its enforcement efforts. It has begun hiring 750 criminal investigators, immigration enforcement agents and deportation officers, as provided in the budget for the 2006 fiscal year.

"We are digging ourselves out of a hole which it took 20 years to dig ourselves into," Mr. Chertoff said. "And it's not going to happen overnight."