

SC's Sanford signs illegal immigration bill

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Gov. Mark Sanford signed legislation Wednesday that threatens to temporarily shut down businesses and fine them up to \$1,000 per worker if they employ illegal immigrants.

Sanford, surrounded by about 20 legislators, said the measure reasserts the rule of law in South Carolina - cracking down on the "wink-and-nod" employment of illegal immigrants. He and legislators said they hope the ideas spread and force Congress to act.

"The message is loud and clear: Stop the silent invasion of this state," said Senate President Pro Tem Glenn McConnell, R-Charleston.

Legislators boasted the measure is the most strict and effective anti-illegal-immigrant bill in the country. Lawmakers made the law increasingly tougher as debate progressed, with constituents becoming more frustrated by the federal government's inaction on the issue.

"It's certainly one of the toughest, if not the toughest," said Larry Frankel, state legislative counsel in the American Civil Liberty Union's Washington office.

Rep. Thad Viers, R-Myrtle Beach, predicted the law will lower the state's unemployment rate, at 5.9 percent in April, because immigrants will "self-deport" and make more jobs available.

But immigrant advocates warn lawmakers may regret what they've done.

Other states to pass comprehensive efforts include Arizona, Oklahoma and Colorado. Georgia passed the first in 2006.

Arizona lawmakers have since considered creating a guest-worker program in the state to fill labor shortages. On Wednesday, a federal judge blocked parts of Oklahoma's anti-illegal immigration law, saying it's likely unconstitutional.

"The problem with bills that are so harsh is they end up hurting businesses who have problems finding employees," said the ACLU's Frankel. "It's also driving people out of state. Some people think, 'That's great; they're illegals,' but it drives out people who are just not willing to be discriminated against because people assume they're illegal."

Frankel said the legislation could worsen the economic downturn's affects in South Carolina.

Sanford's signing ceremony, on the next-to-last day of session and a week before primary elections, ends months of often contentious debate between the House and Senate on a law legislators said at the beginning of the year would pass within a few weeks.

The debate centered on whether private businesses with no state contracts should be required to verify their workers, and how to legally enforce the requirements.

Under the final version, all employers must either check new hires' Social Security number through a federal online database called E-verify or hire workers with a driver's license from South Carolina or another state with strict requirements.

Employers caught not checking their workers can be fined between \$100 and \$1,000 per worker, and if an investigation finds they knowingly hired an illegal immigrant, their business can be temporarily shut down, up to 30 days on first offense and five years if caught a third time.

The state Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation will investigate complaints and can randomly audit companies.

Advocates for Hispanics came to the Statehouse on Thursday to urge the governor to reconsider, calling the measure unfair to hardworking immigrants trying to provide for their families and a burden to small business owners.

"We're just human beings who want a prosperous life," said Diana Salazar, director of the Latino Association of Charleston, an American-born citizen who said her great-grandmother came here illegally with just pennies in her pocket.

She was surrounded by about 15 legal and illegal immigrants with signs reading "America was built on immigrants" and "We are not terrorists or criminals!"

Salazar warned the law will hurt the state's two top industries, tourism and agriculture, because citizens don't want the hard labor. She said election-year politics will have economic consequences.

"There's no way I will be picking those vegetables in 90-degree heat," she said. "Who does the housekeeping at all those fancy hotels?"

The bill also bans adult illegal immigrants from receiving public aid, bars illegal immigrants from attending public colleges and requires them to pay out-of-state rates for private colleges. It creates felonies for harboring or transporting illegal immigrants and for forging documents.

Critics have warned it could lead to racial profiling.

Nationwide, more than 1,560 immigrant-related bills were introduced last year, with 240 becoming law. More than 1,100 bills were introduced in the first quarter of this year, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.