U.S. Program to Verify Worker Status Is Growing

LOS ANGELES — The number of businesses taking part in a voluntary program that allows them to verify electronically their newly hired employees' legal authorization to work in the United States is soaring, the federal government said Tuesday.

About 52,000 employers are now using a Web-based system, known as E-Verify, compared with 14,265 a year ago. The system has been growing in the past year by 1,000 employers a week, said the United States Citizenship and Immigrations Services, which runs the program with the Social Security Administration.

Although the tally is a small fraction of the 5.7 million employers nationwide, program officials said it proved the system was catching on.

"This program is proving to be a key component in promoting the integrity of the employment verification process of our workforce," Emilio Gonzalez, the director of citizenship and immigration services, said in a statement.

The system, which is free, verifies documentation like Social Security cards and immigration papers that people need to work in the United States.

About a third of the employers, 18,000, are in Arizona, where a new state law requires businesses to use the program to verify the right to work for new employees.

Business and immigrant rights groups in Arizona have sued to block the law, saying in part that E-Verify prompts employers to dismiss workers who may be authorized to work but do not have their paperwork in order. A federal judge upheld the law, but the groups have appealed.

In a separate case, a federal judge in December issued a stay in a lawsuit filed by the federal government against Illinois, which had passed a law prohibiting employers from using the system over questions about its accuracy.

About 93 percent of the employees checked in the program receive authorization in a manner of seconds.