



Civil rights groups urge immigrants to use hot line - CNN.com

By the CNN Wire Staff

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(CNN) -- The Southern Poverty Law Center is advocating a legal hot line for immigrants in Alabama in response to a recent change to that state's immigration law, the center said Wednesday.

Alabama, a state that heavily depends on immigrant labor, now has what is considered by some as one of the harshest anti-immigration laws in the United States.

The hot line launched in September, shortly after the state's original immigration law went into effect. The law had several provisions, including one that allowed police to check a person's immigration status if they suspected the person may be in the country illegally. The law was changed in May in what lawmakers said was an attempt to fix some of its unintended consequences and to simplify the law. The new law also clarified what constitutes proper documentation and relaxed provisions dealing with religious leaders and subcontractors who unknowingly hire illegal workers.

Gov. Robert Bentley said he approved the new bill despite his concerns about certain provisions, calling the changes "substantial progress" that eased the "burdens of legal residents and businesses." Bentley reiterated the goal of the law, saying, if "you live and work in Alabama, you must do so legally."

However, civil rights organizations argue Alabama lawmakers traded one "draconian anti-immigrant law" for another.

"State lawmakers have callously refused to address the humanitarian crisis created by Alabama's anti-immigrant law," the Southern Poverty Law Center said.

A coalition of civil rights organizations are working together to alleviate what they say are problems created by the law. The coalition includes the Southern Poverty Law Center, the National Immigration Law Center, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund and Latino Justice.

The coalition encourages immigrants to report civil rights violations and other issues resulting from the law and learn more about their rights. Since September, the hot line has received more than 5,800 calls, according to the center's release.

Several of the stories have been compiled in a Southern Poverty Law Center report, called "Alabama's Shame: HB 56 and the War on Immigrants," which was released in February. In one account, a 13-year-old girl was allegedly refused medical treatment because the new immigration law prohibited the clinic from treating undocumented immigrants. In another, a family of five

was reportedly denied access to running water because they could not provide an Alabama driver's license. According to the report, the utility company finally accepted the father's passport as identification after a local advocate went to the utility company with him. The family went without water for 40 days, the report stated.

"This latest change in the law is nothing more than an attempt to bully and intimidate people, and serves only to encourage vigilantism," said Mary Bauer, legal director for the center, in the release. "(W)e want to know first-hand the suffering it is inflicting on people across the state."

<http://www.cnn.com/2012/06/06/us/alabama-immigrant-hot-line/index.html>