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Immigration database adding self-check option

[Stephen Dinan]

U.S. immigration authorities are planning to add a self-check system so workers can pre-screen themselves with E-Verify, the controversial electronic database used on a voluntary basis by some employers to screen their employees.

The move would try to bridge the gap between the two sides in the immigration debate by putting power in the hands of workers, who could make sure of their status before applying for new jobs.

Alejandro Mayorkas, director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, said the move is in the works, though he said it's too early to provide details.

"We are developing it with the goal of employees being able to self-check," he said.

In a briefing with reporters, Mr. Mayorkas also said definitively his agency "will be ready" to implement any immigrant-legalization program Congress might pass, though he would not give any specifics and said a lot depends on what the new law would look like. He also said it might take more funding from Congress to get the agency ready.

Wading into another contentious battle, Mr. Mayorkas said immigration-benefit fee increases are possible, but said no decision has been made. When his predecessor as director, Emilio T. Gonzalez, pushed through a fee increase to improve services, he was blasted by immigrant rights advocates and some Democrats in Congress, who said it unfairly put benefits out of the reach of many would-be applicants.

Mr. Mayorkas said applications, which peaked right before that last fee increase, have dropped. And since the agency is funded mostly from application fees, that's put a squeeze on USCIS's finances.

On E-Verify, Mr. Mayorkas said the program remains a strong tool to help make sure jobs go to citizens and legal immigrants.

"It protects employees from exploitive employers. It enables employers to ensure the lawfulness of their work force, and therefore comply with the law," he said.

E-Verify began in the 1990s as a voluntary pilot program to allow employers to check new hires' Social Security numbers to see if they were eligible to work.

More than 170,000 employers are signed up to use the Web-based system. Some states have made its use mandatory for all businesses, and others have required state contractors to use it. The federal government this year began requiring contractors to check both new hires and all employees who are working on federal contracts.

Nearly 97 percent of all workers are approved automatically, while the rest are allowed to contest a non-confirmation. Only three-tenths of a percent of those checked successfully contest a non-confirmation.

The self-check system would cut down on the need for those instances.

"This would address a big concern for worker advocates, and it would improve the accuracy of the databases," said Marc R. Rosenblum, a senior analyst at the Migration Policy Institute.

He said one concern right now is that employers might run employees through the database before making a final job offer, and some workers who are erroneously flagged as not authorized could be denied jobs unfairly.

Rosemary Jenks, government relations director at NumbersUSA, which advocates for a crackdown on illegal immigration, said the move is welcome, but she said it would be even better to extend the program to more employers and allow them to check all employees, not just new hires.

"It's perfectly fine, but it seems like it's putting the cart before the horse a little bit," she said.