

Farmers, immigrants unite against E-Verify

E-Verify checks an individual's eligibility to work in the U.S.

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The Associated Press

In Olympia, it's not too often immigrant-advocacy groups and farmers are on the same side of a proposed bill.

But the unlikely allies have teamed up in this session of the Legislature to push a measure aimed at stopping more cities and counties from adopting a federal program that checks an individual's eligibility to work in the U.S.

Known as E-Verify, the Internet-based program has been adopted by 11 cities and counties in Washington state.

Supporters of the program say it provides a free and easy way to do background checks and avoid paperwork problems that could lead to losing workers with questionable documents or facing fines for hiring an illegal immigrant.

Some supporters of E-Verify offer other rationales.

"The reasons Lakewood approved E-Verify were to protect the legal workers and to create fair wages in the labor market," said Michael Savage, director of government affairs for the Pierce County city. "If undocumented workers are taking jobs illegally, it artificially deflates the wages."

But other than the cities of Lakewood and Kennewick, opposition to the bill that would slow down E-Verify seems minor so far.

Backers of the bill have lined up a formidable coalition of farmers and immigrant, labor and religious groups, while other key factions in Olympia, including business organizations, have chosen to remain neutral.

"Sometimes you find common ground and it makes all the sense in the world to join forces in trying to win your battle," said Mike Gempler, director of the Washington Growers League.

Gempler has teamed up with OneAmerica, the state's largest immigrant-advocacy group, to push the bill forward.

Alliance over jobs

Farmers and immigrant groups often have clashed, mostly over the minimum wage, housing conditions and other issues of workers' rights. But the two sides have common ground when it

comes to illegal immigration. Farmers need the labor. Advocacy groups often decry stern enforcement by the federal government.

Such alliances are not necessarily public. Farmers mostly stayed on the sideline publicly last year when moderate and conservative lawmakers of both parties pushed to demand proof of citizenship when obtaining a driver's license. OneAmerica and others fought hard to kill the bill, which eventually did not get a floor vote.

On the E-Verify bill, Gempler's counterparts at the state Farm Bureau have decided to remain neutral.

"We have some members who are supportive of this legislation, some who feel the bill does not harm or help agriculture in the short term, and some who are concerned about the unintended consequences of pursuing any state legislation (pro or con) on E-Verify," the Farm Bureau wrote in a statement to lawmakers.

But Gempler decided to be more public, joining OneAmerica Executive Director Pramila Jayapal in testimony to lawmakers last week.

Both say a national overhaul of the immigration system is needed before more enforcement is mandated, and state and local governments shouldn't interfere.

"We're not saying we never want E-Verify, but do it when you have immigration reform," Jayapal said.

A pre-emptive try

For Gempler, a worst-case scenario would be for Washington to follow in the steps of Arizona or Alabama, which have made E-Verify mandatory for all employers.

The Washington bill is pre-emptive. Besides blocking local jurisdictions from adopting E-Verify, it would also stop the state from doing so.

Washington historically has been a friendly place for immigrants. In the past, state bills to push stricter enforcement or make English the official language haven't met success. A citizen group called Respect Washington that advocates stricter immigration enforcement, including making E-Verify mandatory, has failed to obtain enough signatures over the past several years to place an initiative on the ballot.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, the federal bureau that administers E-Verify, declined to comment on state legislation.

E-Verify uses several federal-government databases to check information on employment documents.

The program is mandatory only for federal agencies. Contractors who work with the federal government and who meet a certain threshold must use it, said Citizenship and Immigration Services spokeswoman Sharon Rummery.

Rummery said nearly 325,000 businesses nationwide voluntarily use the program. In Washington, the number of businesses is more than 5,300.

Seventeen states have adopted E-Verify laws, with several, including Utah, Mississippi and Georgia, requiring private employers use the program.

"It's quick and fairly efficient. You're able to see the verification yourself," said Tawni Helms, of Whatcom County's executive office. "This is using a new technology for something we're expected to do anyways. It's an expectation to verify employment eligibility."

Both Lakewood and Whatcom County require contractors to use E-Verify, and both say no problems have been reported. All the jurisdictions in Washington have adopted E-Verify rules that affect only contractors with the respective government bodies, not general private employers.

But Jayapal said E-Verify has led to errors in the past and firings of people who were legally in the country.

Last year, the federal Government Accountability Office said E-Verify had been improved since its inception in 2004 and identity errors had been reduced, but not eliminated.

The state bill was voted out of committee on Friday and is expected to get a floor vote in the House.

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