

Illegal-hiring bill spurs jest and jeers

Legislation would exempt punishment for family employers

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A proposed immigration law being cast in jest across the country as a way for Texans to rid the work force of illegal immigrants while protecting their low-paid nannies and gardeners drew serious concern Thursday from advocates who fear the bill could have a chilling effect across the state.

Rep. [Debbie Riddle](#)'s House Bill 1202 calls for two years in jail and up to \$10,000 fines for people who "intentionally, knowingly, or recklessly" hire unauthorized immigrants. Specifically exempted: Laborers relegated to "work to be performed exclusively or primarily at a single-family residence."

"House Bill 1202 has just really created an uproar in our community," said Laura Murillo, president of the Houston Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. Riddle "makes an exception for those that might clean her own house or take care of her children. If you can't read between those lines, I don't know what lines you can read between."

Murillo called the bill inhumane and other advocates suggested that it could have serious civil rights ramifications for people of all races and immigration statuses.

"It has an element of 'as long as you know your place,' " said Clarissa Martinez De Castro, director of immigration for the [National Council of La Raza](#).

Riddle, a Tomball Republican, said she didn't expect some of the national reaction to the legislation.

"I'm not very politically correct most of the time. I'm not too good at it," she said. "What I'm trying to do is inject common sense into government. I'm finding out that's not too easy."

In an ideal world, Riddle said no one would hire illegal immigrants. But she said she included the exception because homeowners don't have access to E-verify, the federal Internet-based system that allows businesses to determine the eligibility of their employees to work in the United States.

"The reason that we have, in my opinion, so many folks coming over here illegally is because businesses sort of put a big ol' bowl of candy in the middle of the room and say 'If you can get across the border and through the door then you've got plenty of candy, a job, entitlements, and if you bear children they'll be citizens,' " she said. "What we need to do is remove the big bowl of candy. It's unfair to the taxpayers of Texas to carry the burden."

[Curtis Collier](#), president of U.S. Border Watch, said he could see the bill getting notice on late-night talk shows, but only because people don't understand Riddle's intent.

"So many times in this battle of illegal immigration, people don't understand what the current laws are," he said. "This is the best she could do under the federal law."

An estimated 1.6 million illegal immigrants live in Texas, according to the [Pew Hispanic Center](#).

[Employers](#) already face fines and sanctions for knowingly hiring illegal immigrants under the federal [Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986](#). The Supreme Court is now considering whether [Arizona](#)'s new employment law, for example, is pre-empted by the federal act.

"It's an open question right now. We don't know what the Supreme Court is going to do," said Geoffrey Hoffman, an associate professor who supervises the University of Houston Immigration Clinic.

Staunch conservatives said they wish individuals had access to E-verify so that the exception for domestic workers wasn't needed.

"It's too bad she made that exception," said Paul Smith, vice president of the Tomball Tea Party. "But I'm for it. I think illegal aliens are doing a tremendous damage to our country."

David Smith, a spokesman for the Progressive Workers Organizing Committee, a Houston-area labor group, said he wishes Texas hadn't positioned itself to be included in conversations alongside Arizona regarding anti-immigrant laws.

"I just shudder when I see this kind of stuff," said Smith, a government professor at the [College of the Mainland](#). "It's horrible, just horrible. They shouldn't be harassing people just trying to make a living."

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