



Licensed jobs hit in new immigration law

Tighter state regulations could delay papers for various professions.

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

8:26 a.m. Saturday, November 5, 2011

Enforcing a major part of Georgia's strict new immigration law could delay licenses for tens of thousands accountants, nurses and many other professionals by an additional three to four months, Secretary of State Brian Kemp said Friday.

Georgia business leaders are concerned such delays, stemming from new identification requirements mandated by the law, will slow economic development at a time when the state can least afford it.

Part of House Bill 87 requires people applying for public benefits — including professional licenses — to present a “secure and verifiable” form of identification such as a driver's license or passport.

The aim of HB 87 is to block illegal immigrants from obtaining public benefits to which they are not entitled. That new requirement is set to take effect Jan. 1.

That provision, Kemp said, will force his staff to attach copies of these identification documents to about 256,000 applications for licenses next year.

It now takes his office 25 to 30 days to process new licenses and about two weeks for renewals. The increased paperwork could delay turnaround times by 90 to 120 days, Kemp said.

People applying for the licenses will be allowed to submit copies of their identification electronically, but those who decide to hand-deliver them will need their documents reviewed, scanned and attached to the applicants' files, a spokesman for Kemp's office said Friday.

State law requires certain professionals, including dentists and nurses, to obtain licenses before they can perform their jobs in Georgia. For example, about 55,000 nurses must renew their license before Jan. 31, 2012.

Kemp's office supports 43 professional licensing boards, which issue 200 different licenses, including those for foresters, geologists and used car salvage dealers. He said his office is urging professional organizations to notify their license holders to prepare for the delays.

"The last thing we want to happen is to keep Georgians from working, but it is also our duty to uphold the laws of this state," Kemp said.

Kyle Jackson, the Georgia state director for the National Federation of Independent Business, called the potential delays troubling. And the Georgia Nurses Association said licensing delays could sideline nurses and affect patient care.

"Anytime a licensed professional is delayed in renewing their license or obtaining a new license, not only is the nurse affected by that delay, but also the employer is affected, patient care delivery is affected and ultimately Georgia's tax base is affected," said Deborah Hackman, the association's CEO.

Kemp said he is working with Gov. Nathan Deal's office and seeking additional state funding to hire more staff.

On Friday, he told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution that his office had not yet decided how much additional money and staff it will need. Meanwhile, state officials are looking at ways to prevent the delays through legislation.

Deal signed HB 87 into law in May, hailing it as a victory for state taxpayers who have borne the costs of illegal immigration. The law is partly patterned after a groundbreaking law Arizona enacted last year.

Parts of both Georgia and Arizona's laws are tied up in federal courts amid legal challenges brought by civil and immigrant rights groups. Both states are appealing. The provision in Georgia's law that requires people to show certain forms of identification for public benefits has not been placed on hold by the courts.

The author of HB 87 — Republican Rep. Matt Ramsey of Peachtree City — said in an email Friday that he drafted the law to give government agencies "flexibility to develop processes to make the bill's requirements as efficient as possible for the taxpayers and encourage state and local agencies to do so."

"We will continue to work with those agencies to ensure that intent is carried out," Ramsey said.

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