

State's immigration crackdown is about to expand

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

8:56 a.m. Saturday, December 31, 2011

This is for anyone who relies on public benefits, owns a large business or needs professional licenses to work in Georgia: Major parts of the state's new law cracking down on illegal immigration take effect this Sunday.

Among those provisions is one that will require people to show certain forms of identification before they can get public benefits, including grants, loans and professional licenses.

Also starting Sunday, Georgia businesses with 500 or more employees must start using the federal work authorization program called E-Verify to ensure their new hires are legally allowed to work here.

Those requirements are part of a sweeping new law Georgia enacted this year. Some parts of that law took effect on July 1, including one that punishes people who use phony identification to get jobs here. Other parts are tied up in federal court amid a legal challenge brought by a coalition of civil rights and immigrant rights groups.

Requiring those applying for public benefits to present a "secure and verifiable" form of identification, such as a driver's license or passport, is aimed at preventing illegal immigrants from obtaining benefits they are not entitled to receive.

This provision is already expected to create some unintended consequences. For example, Secretary of State Brian Kemp has been warning in recent weeks it could create months-long delays in issuing professional licenses for tens of thousands of accountants, nurses and others. State law requires certain professionals, including dentists, to obtain licenses before they can perform their jobs in Georgia.

Georgia business leaders are concerned the delays could slow commerce amid a struggling economy. Alarmed by Kemp's warnings, organizations representing accountants, nurses and other professionals have been urging their members not to wait until the last minute to renew their licenses.

Judy Paull, who oversees more than 1,700 nurses at the Medical Center of Central Georgia in Macon, worries such delays could sideline some of her nurses, force her to require others to work overtime and affect her hospital's bottom line. Statewide, more than 50,000 nurses must renew their license before Jan. 31.

“This is a very serious and worrisome situation,” said Paull, the Macon hospital’s chief nursing officer. “So the best I can do is be constantly reminding people and checking to see how many of our nurses have already renewed and are current on their licensure.”

Bill Harshman, a certified public accountant based in the Norcross area, said he and others who need professional licenses shouldn’t have to present their identification documents more than once.

“Once you have established citizenship it seems unnecessary to have to reconfirm that,” he said.

Kemp said this month that he had reached out to the author of Georgia’s immigration law about tweaking it to avoid the license delays. The law’s author — Republican state Rep. Matt Ramsey of Peachtree City — confirmed in an email to the AJC that he was willing to look at how the law is being “implemented and interpreted” to ensure it was being used as intended.

House Speaker David Ralston, R-Blue Ridge, said he was pleased with Georgia’s new immigration law and does not plan to seek changes to it in the upcoming legislative session.

“We have only had six months for it to work,” Ralston said. “Let’s give it some more time. Let’s see what the courts do with what some believe to be constitutional issues and move on.”

Meanwhile, Georgia businesses that have 500 or more employees are preparing to start complying with the part of the law that requires them to use E-Verify. It’s meant to prevent companies from hiring workers who are not legally allowed to work here. Some supporters of the law contend illegal immigrants are taking jobs away from Georgians at a time of high unemployment.

The E-Verify requirement will kick in July 1 for employers with 100 or more workers and July 1, 2013, for companies with 11 employees or more. Those who have 10 or fewer employees are exempt.

These requirements have been triggering some thorny questions and confusion among Georgia employers in recent months. Some have asked whether they apply to seasonal employees and workers based in other states. The answer is yes if they are employed on Jan. 1 during the year those businesses must confirm for the state they are using E-Verify, Ramsey confirmed.

Officials at several large Georgia businesses said they are already using E-Verify or plan to start using it in compliance with the law.

For example, Atlanta-based Delta Air Lines has more than 80,000 employees worldwide and is already using E-Verify, said a Delta spokeswoman. The Coca-Cola Co., which has more than 9,000 employees in Georgia, has been using E-Verify nationwide since 2010, said a spokesman for the Atlanta corporate giant.

A spokesman for Home Depot — which is headquartered in Vinings and employs more than 300,000 workers — said the company already uses the program in five other states. “So we’re prepared to comply with the law here.”

Show your ID

Beginning Jan. 1 under Georgia’s new immigration law, state and local government agencies must start requiring people who apply for public benefits to provide at least one “secure and verifiable” document. The intent of the law is to prevent illegal immigrants from getting benefits they are not entitled to receive. The list includes but is not limited to:

- U.S. and foreign passports
- U.S. military identification cards
- State-issued driver’s licenses and identification cards
- Tribal identification cards
- Federally issued permanent resident cards

A public benefit

Starting Jan. 1, public benefits that will require a “secure and verifiable” ID include but are not limited to:

- Adult education
- Business certificates, licenses or registration
- Business loans
- Energy assistance
- Gaming licenses
- Professional licenses
- State grants or loans
- State identification cards
- Unemployment insurance

For more information, go to www.law.ga.gov and click on “Immigration Reports” under the “Key Issues” tab

<http://www.ajc.com/news/states-immigration-crackdown-is-1283320.html>