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States introduced record number of immigration bills this year

By Stephen Ceasar

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LOS ANGELES State lawmakers considered a record number of immigration-related bills this year, highlighting their continued frustration with federal government inaction on immigration laws, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

A total of 1,592 bills were introduced in all 50 states and Puerto Rico in the 2011 legislative session that ended June 30, a report by the bipartisan research organization found.

State legislators in 40 states enacted 151 of the bills, which mainly addressed law enforcement, identification and employment issues, said Ann Morse, program director of the conference's immigrant policy project. An additional five laws were vetoed by governors.

Five states - Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina and Utah - created laws similar to a controversial Arizona immigration law, known as SB 1070, which requires law enforcement to check the immigration status of people they lawfully stop and whom they suspect to be in the country illegally.

All five of those laws been challenged in federal court, with opponents citing federal pre-emption and violation of the Fourth and 14th amendments.

"The level of interest in the states is still very high," Morse said. "What we're seeing is a frustration with the federal government that it won't take up these issues."

An uptick in states' legislation began in 2005, when 300 bills were introduced and 38 laws were enacted, Morse said.

At that time, states focused primarily on social services and naturalization issues, areas lawmakers believed the federal government was failing to address. But as frustrations with the federal government began to rise, so did the amount of legislation that was introduced, Morse said.

President Barack Obama has said that his administration is continuing its efforts to overhaul the immigration system, but Republicans have become unwilling partners.

While running for office in 2008, Obama said that he would deal with immigration reform in his first year. After the health care overhaul received top priority, it became increasingly less likely that he will be able to pass a bill until after the 2012 election.

By 2007, over 1,500 states' bills were introduced and 240 bills were signed into law. The high numbers have held relatively steady ever since.

Today, lawmakers address "virtually everything you can think of," Morse said.

Ten states passed legislation requiring employers to use E-Verify, an online program that uses federal databases to check whether employees are in the country legally and authorized to work.

New laws in Maryland and Connecticut will allow illegal immigrants to be eligible for in-state tuition. In California, Gov. Jerry Brown signed the DREAM Act, easing access to privately funded financial aid for undocumented college students.

Six states - Alabama, Idaho, Kansas, Michigan, South Dakota and Utah - passed laws requiring that sex offender registries include a requirement of proof of citizenship or immigration documents.

"It's a push and pull between what the federal government does or doesn't do and what the states end up doing themselves," Morse said.