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Texas immigration bill has big exception

By Mariano Castillo, CNN
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(CNN) -- Amid a number of bills filed in Texas that address the issue of illegal immigration, one, proposed by Republican state Rep. Debbie Riddle, stands out.

As proposed, House Bill 1202 would create tough state punishments for those who "intentionally, knowingly, or recklessly" hire an unauthorized immigrant. Violators could face up to two years in jail and a fine of up to \$10,000.

But it is an exception included in the bill that is drawing attention. Those who hire unauthorized immigrants would be in violation of the law -- unless they are hiring a maid, a lawn caretaker or another houseworker.

It is a tough immigration bill with a soft side that protects those who hire unauthorized immigrants "for the purpose of obtaining labor or other work to be performed exclusively or primarily at a single-family residence."

Texas state Rep. Aaron Pena, a Republican, said the exception is a wise one.

"With things as they are today, her bill will see a large segment of the Texas population in prison" if it passes without the exception, he said.

"When it comes to household employees or yard workers it is extremely common for Texans to hire people who are likely undocumented workers," Pena said. "It is so common it is overlooked."

The bills and other illegal immigration-related bills filed by Riddle and others reflect an increased pressure from constituents for action on the issue, Pena said. Because the federal government isn't doing its job, residents press state officials to act, he said.

Leo Berman, a Republican state representative, agreed that there was a stronger voice from Texas voters on the issue. "Absolutely," he said.

The Texas legislature convenes only once every two years, so Texas has not passed tough anti-illegal immigration laws like some other states. The result has been that unauthorized immigrants in those states are relocating to Texas, Berman said.

Berman himself has filed a number of immigrant-related bills this legislative session. One would make English the official language of Texas, a move that would save millions in printing costs, he said. The law wouldn't affect schools or ballots, he added.

Another bill would place an 8% surcharge on all money wired from Texas to Latin America. About \$480 million could be collected from money sent to Mexico alone, the representative said. The proceeds would be earmarked for state hospitals.

A third bill would require police officers to ask every person they stop what their citizenship status is.

Amid all of these tough proposals, why the large exception to Riddle's bill on hiring unauthorized workers?

Riddle did not return repeated calls for comment. Her office said she would not comment on the bill because it could still be modified.

In a interview with the Texas Tribune, Riddle's chief of staff, Jon English, explained that the exception was to avoid "stifling the economic engine" in Texas.

"It is an admittedly clumsy first attempt to say, 'We are really focusing on the big businesses,'" English said. Texans shouldn't be punished for hiring lawn care companies who hire unauthorized immigrants, he said, according to the Texas Tribune's website.