

California immigration crackdown campaign to enlist American Legion members

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Body

Continuing a 93-year fight to control immigration, American Legion leaders are rallying military veterans to convince California voters they should require police to enforce federal immigration law.

"This country is for people who are here legally, who are born here, not for people who came here illegally, who kind of snuck in," said Bill Siler, adjutant of California's American Legion branch.

The Concord resident is co-sponsoring an initiative to keep it that way and plans to enlist help from the 88,780 Legionnaires statewide to help collect the more than half-million signatures needed to put it on the November ballot.

Although better known for its veteran advocacy, devotion to flag etiquette, baseball leagues and patriotic youth programs, the American Legion has lobbied for stricter immigration rules since its founding after World War I.

The group in 1920 won 75 percent of the vote for its first California proposition, strengthening state laws denying Japanese immigrants the right to own land.

The Legion then helped persuade Congress to pass national immigration quotas in 1924 and has sought immigration moratoriums and heightened enforcement every decade since.

"The American Legion, since its inception in 1919, has expressed concern that legal and illegal immigrants arriving in this country in large numbers would be unable to effectively assimilate into our society unless numerical quotas were established and enforced," began one of five immigration-related resolutions the group passed at its 2010 national convention.

This latest California volley aims, in part, to block liberal Bay Area counties from interfering with federal immigration prerogatives. It would require all counties to fully enforce Secure Communities, the network that alerts immigration agents whenever police book a deportable immigrant at a city or county jail.

"If they go to jail, it takes our taxpayer money to keep them here," Siler said. "If they are here illegally, they should be deported."

The measure would also deny driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants, which is already California law but in danger, according to proponents. And it would order sheriffs of the 20 counties with the worst cross-border gang activity to devote more resources to immigration enforcement.

Hundreds of the veterans voted to support it at their state convention in June.

"Hopefully they'll be the ones to get out the signatures to get it on the ballot," Siler said.

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If not, "I guess that will be the end of it."

Initiative author and co-sponsor Ted Hilton of San Diego has been drafting immigration control ballot measures since the early 1990s.

Voters have not been supportive of such drives in recent years.

Hilton's 2009 proposal to revoke automatic citizenship for the U.S.-born children of illegal immigrants failed to find enough signatures.

A Belmont Republican's 2010 initiative modeled on Arizona's immigration crackdown found too few voters willing to put it on the ballot.

Assemblyman Tim Donnelly, R-Claremont, last month fell about 57,000 signatures short of qualifying a measure to revoke a law allowing financial aid for undocumented college students.

But none of those had a veterans organization promising heavy involvement.

"We have over 490 posts, local units up and down the state," said Siler, a 69-year-old Vietnam War Navy veteran who joined the American Legion 33 years ago and has managed the California branch for six years.

The Secretary of State's Office on Jan. 31 cleared the initiative for circulation. Proponents need 504,760 registered voters -- almost six times the Legion's declining statewide membership -- to sign the petition by June 28.

They call it the Protection Against Transnational Gangs Act and say it may block Santa Clara, Santa Cruz and San Francisco counties from refusing to hold some immigrant inmates for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"The criminal element, certainly they're going to go to states where there are more sanctuary ordinances or to counties with policies like Santa Clara County," Hilton said.

Most immigrants living in the U.S. illegally are neither gang members nor criminals and to call the immigration initiative an anti-gang measure may confuse voters about what it would actually do, said Pratheepan Gulasekaram, a Santa Clara University law school professor.

"It's a very shrewd move. Who doesn't want there to be less gang activity?" Gulasekaram said. The added enforcement would cost millions of dollars annually, according to the state's independent analysis.

Joining Siler and Hilton as a sponsor is conservative stalwart Tirso del Junco, an 86-year-old retired surgeon who led the California Republican Party in the early 1980s and was a University of California regent. He plans to tout the measure at the Feb. 24 through 25 statewide GOP convention in Burlingame.

It will be a tough sell even if the measure makes the ballot, Gulasekaram said.

"This sort of stuff tends to get passed only when you have the right partisan conditions, when you have a Republican-dominated electorate and a Republican-dominated Legislature, which we don't have in California." null

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Bill Siler III, the departmental adjutant of California's branch of the American Legion, is photographed in San Francisco, Calif. Monday, Feb. 6, 2012. Siler, of Concord, is working on a newly approved initiative campaign for a law ordering California police to enforce federal immigration law (Kristopher Skinner/Staff)

Bill Siler III, the departmental adjutant of California's branch of the American Legion, is photographed in San Francisco, Calif. Monday, Feb. 6, 2012. Siler, of Concord, is working on a newly approved initiative campaign for a law ordering California police to enforce federal immigration law (Kristopher Skinner/Staff)

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