

Lawmakers seek to curb crashes by immigrant drivers

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Body

Nine **immigrant** workers die in road **crashes** in one week around Philadelphia. Two are killed in Colorado when their **driver** falls asleep. One girl dies in Tennessee when an **immigrant** runs a stop sign.

Tales of accidents involving **immigrants** are becoming more common in the land of opportunity, and automobiles. Now, a few states are looking at a hoped-for solution: driving tests and licenses for illegal **immigrants**.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service "is not sending these people back," said Tennessee State Rep. Mike Turner, a Democrat. "So unless we're going to penalize the people who hire them, they're going to be here. The responsible thing is making sure they know how to drive."

After a decade of record-high immigration nationwide, Tennessee last May apparently became the first state to amend its motor-vehicle law specifically for **immigrants**.

A law sponsored by Turner enables any resident to apply for a license without giving a Social Security number. A handful of other states, including Texas, have considered similar bills. (Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware are not among them.)

The legislation is a response to mostly anecdotal evidence that some **immigrants** are getting into **crashes** as they travel in vehicles operated by people who are either exhausted, inexperienced or ignorant of U.S. traffic rules - perhaps simply because they come from countries where few people drive.

"For better or worse, driving is a necessity in this country to get . . . to a job," said Josh Bernstein, senior policy analyst at the non-partisan National Immigration Law Center, an advocacy group in Washington D.C.

On Monday, a van carrying 19 East Asian **immigrants** heading to Philadelphia from their Delaware workplace swerved into a tanker truck and **crashed** on Interstate 495 near Wilmington, leaving four dead, Delaware State Police Lt. Tim Winstead said yesterday.

The next morning, a van carrying 18 Latino workers to a Lehigh County factory flipped over on Route 309 in Lynn Township, leaving two dead and seven injured, one critically, officials said.

Before dawn on Wednesday, a truck carrying eight men newly arrived from Mexico, en route to restaurant jobs in Burlington County, collided with a tractor-trailer on the New Jersey Turnpike. Three men were killed.

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The causes and conditions of the local crashes, and just who was driving at the time, are still under investigation.

Kenneth J. Elwood, INS Philadelphia district director, indicated in a statement yesterday that the places where the killed and injured immigrants worked would be investigated.

"INS does not tolerate employers who . . . have a role in hiring aliens without INS work authorization," Elwood said. "Alien smuggling and employing unauthorized aliens is not a victimless crime. People are being abused and people die."

While there is no national or regional tally of the number of road accidents involving immigrants, an informal check of recent news reports yielded dozens of isolated reports of crashes - many in the West and South - involving van loads of immigrants. In most cases, the vans were packed with more people than they were designed for, as in the area crashes this week.

Experts on immigrants said undocumented aliens often travel in groups but lack the knowledge, ability or sense of security needed to complain about an unsafe driving condition.

"Part of the problem is that immigrants are forced to accept less-than-safe driving conditions because they're afraid of [speaking out and] getting caught," Bernstein said.

Douglas Rivlin, spokesman for the National Immigration Forum, an advocacy group based in Washington, equated traffic accidents to unsafe working conditions.

"If you're undocumented . . . the conditions you're working under are going to be less than ideal, and one of them is safe-transport conditions," Rivlin said.

Advocates of less immigration also lamented the crashes, but said the solution is not driving lessons but broader INS enforcement in the nation's interior.

"[We] have an immigration problem, not a driving problem," said David Ray, spokesman for the Washington-based Federation for American Immigration Reform. "Our current lack of interior enforcement is luring people to their deaths in the desert and on our highways."

Accidents happen while immigrants are traveling, sometimes cross-country, in search of work, or while simply commuting to a nearby job. Immigrants, particularly illegal ones, may commute in vehicles operated in one of three ways, Rivlin said:

The driver may be an immigrant ferrying fellow migrants to work.

The driver may be a U.S.-born employee or owner of the business where the immigrants work.

Or, less common, the driver may be in the business of finding and ferrying immigrant workers to a work site, for a fee.

"The INS is so underfunded, it really cannot follow all of them," Rivlin said.

It's unclear whether a driver's license will be the answer. Tennessee officials now face a backlash against their law, in part because immigrants have swamped the state's driver license stations.

"This will do very little to ensure they're driving any better," said Ray, adding that a license opens new opportunities for illegal aliens. "The license is one of the documents that is used in receipt for a number of other social services."

But Turner said "if just one of those [immigrants] had taken a driving test, maybe one of those people would be here today. There's no doubt in my mind that it will help."

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