Worker Verification System Is Favored;

Immigration Commission to Present Its Recommendation to Congress

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The United States should create a nationwide information ***system*** that would allow employers to verify a job applicant's authorization to work, according to members of the U.S. ***Commission*** on ***Immigration*** Reform, which soon will ***present*** its ***recommendation*** to ***Congress***.

The goal is to improve enforcement of the 1986 federal law prohibiting the employment of illegal immigrants and thus deter them from entering the country.

The ***commission***'s plan seems certain to pose difficult political choices for President Clinton, who appointed former representative Barbara Jordan (D-Tex.) to head the panel amid promises that it would produce a blueprint for legislation.

Jordan is scheduled to offer a preview of the ***recommendations*** in congressional testimony next week, and the ***commission***'s full report to ***Congress*** is due at the end of September. Even though the proposals are not official yet, they have reignited arguments over whether thwarting illegal ***immigration*** justifies large and intrusive programs such as a national identification card.

"We have been following the ***commission***'s deliberations closely, and we will challenge any proposal involving an identification ***system*** that we consider ineffective and potentially discriminatory -- just as we have in the past," said Cecilia Munoz, ***immigration*** analyst for the National Council of La Raza, an umbrella group of Latino organizations.

Under current law, job applicants must prove that they are either U.S. citizens or legal immigrants authorized to work. But the proof can come from 29 different documents ranging from a drivers license to a passport. Because employers are not required to determine the authenticity of the documents, numerous studies have pointed to widespread fraud through counterfeiting.

"A lot of the details are still to be worked out, but the ***commission*** is definitely looking toward a ***system*** that reduces fraud by allowing employers to verify whether a specific individual is in fact authorized to work " said Susan Martin, executive director of the ***commission***.

"Ideally, employers would be able to call into a computer and check a person's eligibility for employment as easily as retailers verify a credit card now," said former representative Bruce A. Morrison (D-Conn.), a member of the ***commission***.

A major challenge, he said, is the lack of a reliable database for such a **_system_**. Social Security Administration records come closest, but proof of citizenship or legal **_immigration_** status was not always required to get a number. Also, that **_system_** itself has been subject to considerable fraud.

"No question it will be a long process, maybe a decade long, to clean up the records," Morrison said, "but at least we are talking about refining an existing **_system_** that is supposed to identify people for purposes of employment and benefits."

Even if a **_system_** can be devised to verify work authorization, there is still the challenge of ensuring that a job applicant is actually the person he or she claims to be. The **_commission_** has discussed proposals to create an identification card that would be used specifically to gain employment, but members of the panel say there is still considerable disagreement on the subject.

"Leaving civil liberties and all the other issues aside, the experts tell us that an ID card is a loser because it will cost billions of dollars and will be counterfeited within weeks," said Warren Leiden, a **_commission_** member and the executive director of the American **_Immigration_** Lawyers Association.

The nine-member **_commission_** was created by **_Congress_** in 1990 to study and report on the impact of **_immigration_** policies. In the past year it has worked closely with the Clinton administration but has not sought specific approval for its proposals, Martin said.

Congress considered workplace identity **_systems_** when it enacted major changes in **_immigration_** law in 1986 and 1990, and both times it rejected the idea in the face of determined opposition.

Latino leaders said their people would be unfairly victimized. Civil libertarians protested that a national data bank and identity cards could be misused. Some **_immigration_** experts said many illegal immigrants would be beyond the reach of such a **_system_** because they work on farms, in households or in sweatshops where many employment laws routinely are ignored. All of these objections have resurfaced as the **_commission_** moves toward a final **_recommendation_**.

Congress and the administration will have to decide whether concern about illegal **_immigration_** is great enough to overcome the controversy that an employment **_verification_** **_system_** is certain to encounter.

Lawrence H. Fuchs, a history professor at Brandeis University and a vice chairman of the **_commission_**, is certain that the political atmosphere has changed and that better solutions are now available.

"**_Congress_** punted two times," he said, "and this **_commission_** is saying that we are not going to punt this time. We are not going to have a national identifier, but we are going to have a **_system_** that identifies people eligible for work and we'll do it with full regards for civil rights and civil liberties."

Classification

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