

## **Next Stop: Underground; If Virginia has its way with illegal immigrants**

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### **Body**

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REPUBLICAN state lawmakers in Virginia have advanced a grab bag of legislation designed to hound, harass and hassle illegal immigrants. The idea, as expressed by the author of one such bill, Del. Jackson H. Miller of Manassas, is "to make Virginia an unwelcome place if you are in this country illegally." Translation: Drive the immigrants out of the state. In this the bills are overwhelmingly likely to fail, since most immigrants are likely to remain near jobs despite official persecution. But the bills do threaten to push undocumented immigrants further underground, forcing them to live in fear, draw their curtains and keep their children indoors even as they fill a niche in the local economy.

Many of the measures are so patently obnoxious that they are unlikely to become law. One bill, Mr. Miller's, would cut off the flow of state and local funds to charities that might assist illegal, and presumably needy, immigrants. Another would make it a crime for an undocumented immigrant even to be in Virginia -- even though immigration is properly the purview of the federal government. There are bills to deny in-state tuition rates at public colleges and universities to illegal immigrants, even to those who have grown up in the state; to withhold business licenses from firms that would employ the immigrants; and to expand the power of state and local police to detain them.

Many of the bills are similar to ones making their way through legislatures across the country, particularly in states whose vibrant job markets have made them magnets for people who are here illegally. Two years ago, 500 immigrant-related bills were introduced in state legislatures nationwide, according to a survey by the National Conference of State Legislatures. No survey is yet available for this year, but it appears, according to the evidence from Virginia and elsewhere, that the number will have grown exponentially.

Not all the Virginia bills are heading for enactment; cooler heads in the state Senate will make short work of some. Still, taken together, the proposals transmit a message of hostility to newcomers. And good luck telling green-card-holders that the state doesn't object to them -- just to their cousins and nephews and aunts who lack the right papers.

The fact is, as many of the same conservative Republicans voting for the anti-immigrant bills know, the primal forces of economics -- hunger, need, the human thirst for self-advancement -- will generally trump official attempts at discrimination. If there is legislation to penalize landlords who rent to illegal immigrants, some will evict their tenants, and others will just demand more money under the table. If employers face sanctions for hiring illegal immigrants, many will nonetheless continue doing so, perhaps through subcontractors willing to assume the risk. Lawmakers who propose anti-immigrant legislation may be responding to the legitimate complaints of their

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constituents or to the worst instincts in American politics. Either way, their measures could inflict considerable pain while failing to solve a problem whose causes, and ultimate solution, lie with the federal government.

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