

Georgia donors help Ariz. legal fight

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Highlight: Residents have given \$47,939 to defend law. Contributors from all 50 states have sent \$3.7 million in dispute.

Body

Opponents of legislation targeting illegal immigration in Georgia say the state will face costly court challenges if it passes the bills, just like Arizona has since Republican Gov. Jan Brewer signed the nation's toughest such law in April.

But Arizona has not spent taxpayer money defending its law in court, said Joseph Kanefield, Brewer's general counsel. Arizona has instead funded its legal defense with private donations. As of Feb. 23, 43,437 donors from all 50 states have donated \$3.7 million to the cause, according to Brewer's office. Of that amount, \$1.5 million has been paid to a private law firm that is representing the state in court.

"There hasn't been any taxpayer money spent to defend the law even though private counsel is largely doing the heavy lifting," Kanefield said.

Georgia ranks 12th among states in total donations, according to an Atlanta Journal-Constitution analysis of records obtained from the Arizona governor's office. Through Feb. 28, donors from Georgia made 1,051 contributions to Arizona's fund, ranging from \$1 to \$1,000. In all, Georgians have given \$47,939.

Steven Tambroni, an engineer from Albany who donated \$200 in July, said illegal immigrants are attending public schools in the United States and are a burden for taxpayers here.

"I am totally against illegal immigration," he said Friday. "It's personally affecting me every time I pay taxes."

Wyoming ranks first for contributions to the fund because of a \$1.5 million donation from Timothy Mellon. Mellon could not be reached for comment Friday. Arizona ranks second in donations with \$369,067.

Arizona's SB 1070 requires state and local police to verify the immigration status of suspects in cases where there is "reasonable suspicion" that they are in the country illegally. Georgia's House and Senate have each passed similar legislation this month. House Bill 87 and Senate Bill 40 are awaiting final resolution.

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The Obama administration sued last year to block SB 1070, arguing it is pre-empted by federal law. A federal judge ruled in favor of the federal government and put some of the most controversial provisions of Arizona's law on hold. Arizona is appealing that judge's decision.

Arizona state Senate President Russell Pearce, the Republican author of SB 1070, decried the Obama administration's court challenge and accused the president of siding with the Mexican government.

"It's outrageous," Pearce said last week during an interview at his state Capitol office in Phoenix. "It's impeachable in my opinion."

Meanwhile, the American Civil Liberties Union and many other groups are also fighting Arizona's law in court. They are arguing in a separate lawsuit that SB 1070 is unconstitutional. The ACLU of Georgia has already vowed to sue to block Georgia's bills if they become law.

"State lawmakers should be wary of subjecting Georgia taxpayers to exorbitant litigation costs defending the unconstitutional legislation," said Azadeh Shahshahani, director of the National Security/Immigrants' Rights Project for the ACLU of Georgia.

Republican Rep. Matt Ramsey, the author of Georgia's HB 87, argues his bill is not an "Arizona copycat" as some critics have warned. He has said he has worked on more than 16 drafts of his legislation, partly to strengthen it against potential court challenges. Watching Arizona's legal battle play out in court helped, he said.

"We are 100 percent confident in the constitutionality and legality of the bill," Ramsey said. "We are not going to let a threat from a fringe group like the ACLU stop us from passing critical legislation."

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