

Va. Bills Targeting Illegal Residents; Restrictions Sought On Work, Schooling For Immigrants

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Body

Legislators in **Virginia** are intensifying their effort to crack down on **illegal immigrants**.

They have introduced **bills** in the House and Senate that would, among other things, prevent **illegal immigrants** from attending state colleges and universities, punish businesses that employ them and require proof of citizenship or legal residency to obtain a marriage license.

More than 40 **bills** and resolutions dealing with the immigration issue are likely to be considered in the session that began Jan. 11. Many would **restrict** access to public resources or grant broader powers to state officials. Some, such as a **bill** to bar **illegal immigrants** from receiving in-state tuition rates, have been introduced previously but failed to become law. Others, such as the marriage license **bill**, are new.

"This is a complicated issue, but there are some simple answers to it," said Del. John S. "Jack" Reid (R-Henrico), who led a morning news conference at the state Capitol that was attended by dozens of activists on both sides of the issue.

Attendees included members of the group Help Save Herndon, which has opposed public funding for the town's controversial day laborer site on the grounds that many such workers are in the country illegally. Members of other groups, who were in Richmond to lobby lawmakers on the issue, held signs that read: "No Backroom Deals on Amnesty for Illegals" and "Stop False Documents."

One lawmaker who opposes such proposals said the **bills** were merely attempts to play to certain political constituents. "This is not about immigration," said Del. Albert C. Eisenberg (D-Arlington). "It's all about making points with narrow specific groups who respond to these kinds of appeals."

Other legislation would require that applicants for driver's licenses take their tests in English and without an interpreter. Efforts to crack down on employers include a measure that would prevent companies that hire **illegal immigrants** from receiving state contracts.

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Like efforts to tighten abortion laws, proposed **restrictions** on **illegal** immigration now come before state politicians annually. During the 2005 session, legislators passed measures that further limited **illegal immigrants** access to Medicaid and other benefits.

Often such legislation is passed in the more conservative House but is defeated in the Senate. Any **bills** that pass both chambers would go to Gov. Timothy M. Kaine (D) for signature or veto.

"We need to send a message," said Del. Thomas D. Gear (R-Hampton), who is sponsoring the **bill** to deny **illegal immigrants** access to public colleges and universities. "If they come in legally, glad to have you. If not, we don't need them in the country. Go back."

During last year's gubernatorial campaign, Republican Jerry W. Kilgore called attention to the issue when he announced his opposition to the Herndon day laborer site, which is financed in part with public money. **Illegal** immigration was also a prominent topic in several House races.

Advocates for **immigrants** said after Tuesday's news conference that several of the **bills** would violate federal equal protection laws. They said sponsors, who include some Democrats as well as many Republicans, are ignoring the need for national reforms on immigration policy.

"Current federal laws do not reflect the economic reality . . . and our dependency on a large labor force of both documented and undocumented **immigrants**," said Tim Freilich, managing attorney for the **Virginia** Justice Center for Farm and **Immigrant** Workers in Falls Church. "If you hurt **Virginia immigrants**, you hurt **Virginia**."

Studies estimate that **Virginia's illegal immigrant** population has tripled since 1996, to about 180,000.

"Change creates some fear," said Claire Guthrie Gastañaga, a lobbyist who represents **immigrant** groups.

Passage of some of the **bills** would put **Virginia** in the forefront of states' efforts to combat **illegal** immigration, supporters and opponents agreed. A **bill** sponsored by Del. Jeffrey M. Frederick (R-Prince William) would allow state police to enforce federal immigration law, something that only Florida and Alabama allow at present. **Virginia** would be the only state to prevent **illegal immigrants** from attending public colleges and universities if that measure became law.

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