

## **Latino Groups Lobby for More Rights**

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### **Body**

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As Virginia lawmakers continued to consider a swath of bills aimed at punishing illegal immigrants and their employers, **Latino** immigrants and advocates took to the state Capitol yesterday to press for laws that expand the **rights** of people living in the country illegally.

About 100 people, most of them from Northern Virginia, fanned out to lawmakers' offices, gathered in biting wind for a short rally and attended a lunch visited by Gov. Timothy M. Kaine (D), who told them that he is committed to keeping Virginia a "welcoming place" for all.

The second annual **Latino Lobby** Day, coordinated by a coalition of Virginia **Latino rights groups**, drew twice as many people this year, said organizers, adding that the turnout reflected a heightened sense of urgency this session. Nearly 50 immigrant-related bills have been proposed in the General Assembly this year, most of which seek to crack down on illegal immigration.

"We're here to express our outrage at a very mean-spirited set of bills that have been introduced in the legislature of Virginia," Arlington County Board Vice Chairman Walter Tejada (D) said at a news conference. Many of the proposals, he said, "are based on myth and hate."

Yet even as the **Latino** coalition members -- including seasoned lobbyists in suits and day laborers in sweat shirts -- made their rounds, the Virginia House of Delegates pushed ahead with efforts to fight illegal immigration.

The House gave tentative approval yesterday to a bill that would make it a felony to harbor, conceal or shield an illegal immigrant and a measure that would make it a state crime to illegally be in the United States. A final vote on the latter bill is scheduled for today, but Senate leaders have indicated they are unlikely to approve it because local police are not equipped to enforce immigration laws.

The House has recently passed proposals to deny state and local funding to charities that assist illegal immigrants, to deny in-state tuition to illegal immigrants and to allow police to help federal authorities catch such immigrants. Many of the House-generated bills are expected to fail in the Senate.

The issue of immigration has been less heated in Maryland's legislature, where fewer than six immigrant-related bills have been introduced, including a measure that would bar illegal immigrants from getting Maryland driver's licenses.

## Latino Groups Lobby for More Rights

In visits to lawmakers' offices yesterday, the **Latino** lobbyists trained their arguments on four proposals, opposing three House bills and asking for support for a Senate bill that would give in-state tuition to many young illegal immigrants. In many cases, they met with legislative aides or left messages with receptionists.

"We don't want a free ride," said Carlos Soles, of the Democratic **Latino** Organization of Virginia, standing in a hallway while speaking to a legislative intern for Sen. Kenneth W. Stolle (R-Virginia Beach). "But we have to make sure that kids have an opportunity to get an education."

In Soles's **group** was Jose L. Vela, a Bolivian making his first foray into U.S. politics. In an interview, Vela, 45, spoke proudly of the Arlington citizens police academy training he completed and his membership in a neighborhood emergency response team -- efforts he said show his contributions to his community.

Vela, who is an illegal immigrant, said the training erased his fear of police. Some of the laws under consideration could change that, he said.

"The police would be backtracking. People would not trust them," Vela said.

The efforts drew censure from John Kawapisz, legislative director for the Virginia Council for Immigration Reform, a **group** that backs most of the restrictive bills under consideration. After attending the **Latino** coalition's news conference, he said organizers were misleading the public by denouncing some bills as "anti-immigrant." The measures, he said, are anti-illegal immigrant.

Staff writers Tim Craig and Ovetta Wiggins contributed to this report.

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