

## **Alabama's anti-immigrant law deserves to be blocked, for good**

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### **Body**

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The nation's laws against illegal immigration ought to mean something, but for years they did not. The quip was that there were two signs at the U.S. border: The first one said "Keep Out" and the second, a few feet farther in, said "Help Wanted." Anyone who managed to sneak into the country could usually find work and settle into a better life, without much fear of being deported.

The federal government's decision to look the other way turned the law into a joke and created an illegal-immigrant boom that eventually enraged many Americans. Now that anger, coupled with gridlock in Washington over immigration reform, has several states competing to see which can come up with a response that is as shortsighted and thoughtless as the original mistake.

The latest, and by many measures the worst, is an Alabama law that was set to go into effect this week until a federal judge temporarily blocked it on Monday while she considers whether it's constitutional. Other judges have already held up similar statutes in Arizona, Georgia, Indiana and Utah. The Alabama law deserves the same fate.

The law is more of a primal scream than a legitimate way to limit illegal immigration. It would turn all Hispanics into suspects, not just those here illegally, and it would potentially expose people who associate with them to prosecution. Anyone suspected of knowingly hiring undocumented immigrants, transporting them, renting them a place to live, or acting to "conceal, harbor or shield" them could be charged.

The law would also empower police to detain anyone who couldn't prove his or her legal status on the spot. (Think for a moment: Could you do that?). And in a novel extension of the war on illegals to children, education officials would be required to verify the legal status of any child entering school. Because courts have ruled that every child has the right to a public education, Alabama officials insist no child would be barred from school, but that's utterly disingenuous. How many parents here illegally will voluntarily "out" themselves by sending a child to school to be checked for papers?

The Alabama law is intended to create such a hostile environment for illegal immigrants that they'll leave, which many already have -- to the consternation of farms and construction companies, which are increasingly running short of workers. The law's proponents say that just opens up jobs for legal Alabamians. We'll see. The more probable result is to foster bigotry and injustice.

Alabama and other states with similarly harsh laws justify them by insisting that the federal government has done virtually nothing to enforce immigration law. That might once have been true, but now it's not.

Since President Obama took office in 2009, immigration audits of businesses to find illegal workers have increased fourfold, and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has sharply increased deportations, to more than 400,000 last year. The border has become more secure, and the flood of immigration from Mexico has slowed significantly because of tougher enforcement, the U.S. recession and declining Mexican birth rates.

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The courts will eventually rule which provisions of the laws in Alabama and other states comport with the Constitution. That's one way to sort this out. The other is to pass a sensible federal law that combines secure borders and tough workplace enforcement with a guest-worker program and a path to legality for immigrants who have become law-abiding, taxpaying residents. After all, the reason so many came here was to get jobs and support their families, not the most heinous of crimes. How about it, Congress?

## Graphic

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PHOTO, B/W, Mark Almond, AP

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