Tough immigration law raises fears in Alabama; As families scatter, local businesses feel impact

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Body

Before the ***law*** chased them away, several dozen customers crowded into the Discount Grocery and Variety store here each morning, shopping for fresh avocados, telephone cards, Mexican DVDs or loaves of sweet bread.

On a morning last week, one customer showed up, took a lap through the empty store and left.

The weak economy has hurt ***business***. But nothing has battered Discount Grocery and Variety worse than ***Alabama***'s newly enacted ***immigration law***, owner Andres Miguel says. The ***law*** -- which has made ***Alabama*** the ***toughest*** state in the USA for undocumented immigrants to live and find work -- has ***scattered families***, including the majority of his customers, he says. ***Business*** is down 60% from last month -- and dropping by the day.

"We've seen so many ***families*** leave. They just drive off in the middle of the night," says Miguel, 54, a Guatemalan native. "Pretty soon, all Hispanics here will leave. When that happens, we'll leave, too."

The new ***Alabama law*** that grants ***local*** authorities broad powers to crack down on illegal immigrants is sending shock waves across the state. The ***law*** allows ***local*** police to detain without bail immigrants suspected of being in the country illegally and requires schools to verify the ***immigration*** status of new students. Those found to be here illegally risk being deported to their native countries.

A federal judge last month upheld key components of the statute, allowing much of the ***law*** to go into effect.

The U.S. Justice Department asked the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals to temporarily block enforcement, arguing that ***immigration*** enforcement is the responsibility of the federal government and that the state is infringing on that role. On Friday, the court temporarily blocked parts of the ***law*** -- those requiring schools to check students' ***immigration*** status and making it a crime for immigrants not to have proper documentation. But it let stand -- for now -- the power of police to detain people suspected of being in the USA illegally.

Well before Friday's action by the appeals court, a number of Hispanic ***families***, both legal residents and those in the country illegally, fled ***Alabama*** for other states in the cover of night, leaving behind homes still filled with furniture, TVs and refrigerators stocked with food.

The exodus has left a sizable gap in the pool of workers and day laborers crucial to industries across the state. Farmers in northern ***Alabama***, construction workers trying to rebuild Tuscaloosa from tornadoes this year and coastal ***businesses*** all have reported massive worker shortages. Earlier this month, 7% of Hispanic children in the state -- about 2,300 students -- did not show up for classes.

The ***law*** already is leading to arrests. At least six people have been arrested by ***local*** police for not having proper ***immigration*** documents.

Critics such as the ACLU and the National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic civil rights group, say it will lead to racial profiling and will fill ***Alabama*** jails with immigrants. Last Wednesday, Hispanic ***businesses*** across the state closed shop and workers stayed home from their jobs to protest the ***law***. More than 5,100 Hispanic students also stayed home from school that day.

"It's a slap to the face," says Juan Martinez, who shuttered his Russellville grocery and tortilla factory in support of the boycott. "It's hurting the stores. It's hurting the state. Everyone's going to ***feel*** the pain."

Supporters of the ***law*** argue that ***Alabama*** is taking necessary steps to stem the flow of undocumented immigrants into the state -- something the federal government has failed to do.

Federal judges in Arizona, Utah, Indiana and Georgia have blocked key aspects of similar ***laws*** in those states. A similar ***law*** in South Carolina is to take effect Jan. 1 but also faces a lawsuit challenging its legality.

Alabama House Speaker Mike Hubbard, a Republican, says he cringes when he hears the ***law*** compared to Jim Crow ***laws***, state and ***local*** ***laws*** that targeted African Americans in the South decades ago and were eventually repealed.

"There's a big difference," Hubbard says. "In that time, it was the federal government making the states do what was right. In this case, it's the state of ***Alabama*** trying to make the federal government do what's right. We're not targeting any particular race. The people who are ***law***-abiding, tax-paying citizens just don't like having someone in the state who's in the country illegally."

Alabama's ***immigration law*** highlights what President Obama has described as a dangerous "patchwork" of ***immigration laws*** across the USA as more states tackle the subject and federal judges issue sometimes conflicting rulings.

The issue could be headed for the U.S. Supreme Court. Arizona's blocked ***law*** could provide that forum; the high court is expected to decide whether to take up the case later this year.

Small town ***feels*** the brunt

The ***law*** is being ***felt*** most deeply in places such as Russellville, a hill town in northwest ***Alabama*** that has seen a surge of Hispanic residents.

Workers from Mexico, Guatemala and other Latin American countries began arriving more than a decade ago to work at nearby poultry plants. ***Families*** followed and found jobs, Mayor Troy Oliver says. They opened ***businesses***, too, filling downtown with Mexican bakeries, Guatemalan gift shops and Spanish-speaking income tax ***law*** firms.

Today, Hispanics make up about one-third of the city's 9,830 residents, Oliver says. They contribute significantly to sales tax rolls, which pay for nearly half of the city's $8.5 million annual budget, he says. Since the ***law*** took effect, Oliver has met with Hispanic groups, answering questions and trying to quell ***fears*** of a crackdown.

The ***law*** puts Oliver and other ***local*** officials in the precarious position of reassuring Hispanic residents while fulfilling their legal obligations. Last Wednesday, Oliver walked through the city's mostly shuttered downtown, greeting Hispanic ***families*** on the street and urging them to keep their children in school.

"We are going to enforce the ***law***. We're sworn to do that," he says. "But we're not going to do it the point where we're abusive to anyone. We're not going to get into racial profiling."

Enforcing the ***law*** could be tricky. One of the key questions ***local*** police departments face is how to determine "reasonable suspicion" that a person is in the country illegally, as worded by the ***law***, analysts say. "This has the potential to have U.S. citizens and legal residents being arrested for nothing," says Neville Cramer, a former federal ***immigration*** agent who consulted with Arizona authorities as they developed an officer training curriculum under a similar ***law***.

The ***law*** also could bring economic ramifications. ***Businesses*** most at risk include construction firms, poultry processors and farms, many of which previously relied on undocumented workers for labor

Jobs Americans don't want

A key argument of the ***law***'s supporters is that departing undocumented workers will create job openings that Alabamians can fill, says Jay Reed, president of the ***Alabama*** Associated Builders and Contractors, a Birmingham-based trade group representing 700 construction companies and subcontractors. But his group has been trying to recruit ***locals*** into construction jobs for years: Many just don't want them, he says.

"***Immigration*** reform is certainly needed," Reed says. "But a far-reaching piece of legislation that drives workers out of the state through racial profiling is not the way to do it."

In Russellville, word of the new ***law*** rattled ***families*** living at Creekside Rentals, a 100-unit mobile home park on the south side of town.

About 75% of the ***families*** are Hispanic, says Greg Parrish, the park's owner. Six ***families*** moved out overnight, leaving behind furniture, ***family*** photos and closets full of clothes.

Parrish says he ***fears*** more will go soon, even though he has tried to persuade them to stay. Without Hispanics, the park -- and many other city ***businesses*** -- will quickly close, he says.

"Fifteen years ago, Russellville was a dead town," Parrish says. As Hispanics moved in, "everything started booming. They put a lot of money back into the community. If they leave, Russellville's going to be hurting big time."

The day after a federal judge upheld key provisions of the ***law***, 79 Hispanic students skipped classes at Russellville's four public schools -- nearly four times the normal number, says Rex Mayfield, the superintendent. The numbers alarmed Mayfield enough to call a student meeting that day in the high school's auditorium, where he explained the ***law*** and urged students to calm their parents' ***fears***. About 800 of the schools' 2,400 students are Hispanic.

Maria, 34, an undocumented native of Guatemala whom USA TODAY is identifying only by her first name because of her ***immigration*** status, has kept her 11-year-old daughter home from school several times since the ***law*** passed. She says she's terrified of being separated from her daughter and 1-year-old son and deported without them.

She says she applied for permanent residence status in 2000 and is still awaiting an answer. Both her children were born in the USA and are citizens.

She leaves her home only to make quick trips to the ***local*** Catholic church, the only place that quiets her anxiety. "I have faith in God," she says. "He's the only one who empowers us."

Others have applied for visas but are still waiting or ***raising*** money to finalize the transactions.

It took Russellville resident Angelica Perez, 21, two years and $14,000 in attorney, travel and filing fees to land a green card for her husband.

"It's not as easy as it sounds," says Angelica Perez, who was born in ***Alabama*** to Guatemalan parents and is a U.S. citizen. "There are so many people who come here just to better their lives. This ***law*** is flipping our world in so many ways."

Support for the ***law***

Not everyone in Russellville opposes the new ***law***.

Paul Bragwell, 73, owner of City Barber Shop, says he gets along with most of his Hispanic neighbors. But if they've entered the country without going through the legal channels, they should be prosecuted, he says.

"If they come here illegally, they're no different than other criminals," Bragwell says.

The Pollo Loquillo restaurant downtown has always enjoyed a bustling lunch crowd. Lately, however, the restaurant has been nearly empty around noon.

The lunchtime crush has been replaced by a rash of daily take-out orders -- residents afraid to leave their homes are instead phoning in their broiled chicken orders, manager Juan Carlos Sanchez says.

"The people don't want to drive, don't want to leave their homes," he says. "It's sad."

At the Creekside Rentals mobile home park, children play in gravel lots while parents talk to one another, deciding when to leave and where to go.

Parrish, the trailer park's owner, says it's hard watching the departure of ***families*** he has known for years. Those ***families*** worked hard, paid their rent on time and went to church each week. They're exactly the type of people ***Alabama*** should be trying to keep, he says.

"The people who put this ***law*** into effect didn't understand what it will do from the ground up," Parrish says. "It's going to end up causing a lot more trouble than they know."

Gomez reported from Washington. Contributing: The Associated Press

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