

Perdue: Boost illegals funding; More help sought to meet prison costs

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Byline: JAMES SALZER

Body

Georgia officials say they are paying about \$18 million a year to house illegal immigrants in state prisons, and Gov. Sonny Perdue wants the federal government to foot a bigger chunk of the bill.

Perdue and 13 other governors this week sent members of Congress a letter urging them to double the amount of money allocated for the State Criminal Alien Assistance Program, which helps offset the cost of housing, clothing and feeding illegal immigrants in prison.

Last year, the federal government gave the state about \$1.4 million, less than 10 percent of the cost of housing illegal immigrants in Georgia prisons. President Bush has proposed killing the program.

Georgia House Appropriations Chairman Ben Harbin (R-Evans) also says the federal government ought to pick up a bigger share of the tab.

"The responsibility to control our borders and remove illegal immigrants lies with the federal government," Harbin said. "We have very little control over that.

"If the federal government were doing its job, they wouldn't be here. If they were doing their job, we wouldn't have them in our facilities."

State lawmakers began looking into the cost of housing illegal immigrants in prison when they were debating Senate Bill 529, a sweeping effort to crack down on illegal immigrants and the people who employ them. The bill would require state and local government agencies to verify the immigration status of adults applying for taxpayer-provided benefits in Georgia. It also requires that companies doing business with the state check the legal status of new employees and that jailers report illegal immigrants arrested for felonies or DUI to federal immigration authorities. The measure passed the General Assembly last week and is awaiting Perdue's signature.

There are 1,027 inmates now in Georgia prisons who will be released into the custody of immigration officials once they get out of prison. Immigration officials won't say how many of those are illegal immigrants, but they guess that about three-quarters of those with federal detainers entered the country illegally. Some might have entered the country on a legal visa but may be deported because they committed a crime in this country. State officials say they assume all prisoners with federal detainers are illegal immigrants.

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The immigrants in Georgia's **prisons** range from drug dealers and check forgers to killers, according to the Department of Corrections. Anybody convicted of a crime must serve his or her sentence before being released to immigration officials.

Other states have much **more** at stake. California estimates it spends \$750 million a year to house illegal immigrants in **prison**. That's **more** than the federal government will send the states to offset **costs** this year.

The bipartisan letter to congressional budget writers, signed by **Perdue**, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, Texas Gov. Rick Perry, Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich and California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, among others, requests \$850 million from the federal government next year.

"These **funds** are critical to states such as ours and needed to at least partially offset the **costs** our taxpayers are bearing as a result of the failure to control illegal entries along our international border," the letter states.

U.S. Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-Ga) said he supports the state's efforts to win higher reimbursement from the federal government, and he suspects Congress will support some level of **funding** for the program.

Isakson, a former state legislator, said it's similar to the problem counties in Georgia face with having to pay to house inmates who have been sentenced to state **prisons** but have yet to be picked up.

"We tell the states if they arrest them and adjudicate them, ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] will come pick them up," Isakson said. "Well, we're not picking them up, and we're not paying.

"It's an unfunded mandate, is what it is."

--- Staff writer Carlos Campos contributed to this article.

Graphic

Photo: U.S. Sen. Johnny Isakson says he supports the effort to get a higher reimbursement.

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