

Around the South Florida's frustration over immigration

The Atlanta Journal and Constitution

March 29, 1994, Tuesday

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Section: NATIONAL NEWS; Section A; Page 3

Length: 577 words

Byline: By Mike Williams STAFF WRITER

Body

Budget "nightmare": It's costing the state a whopping \$ 2.5 billion a year to provide for legal and illegal immigrants.

Miami - Last year, Dade County's public schools enrolled 16,000 undocumented immigrant children, spending an average of \$ 4,500 apiece for their education.

The \$ 72 million total could have built a dozen new schools and staffed them with teachers.

At Jackson Memorial Hospital, the county's largest public medical center, officials have written off \$ 102 million in unpaid bills racked up by undocumented immigrants in the past three years.

Hospital officials say the costs could have triggered a financial crisis had voters not recently passed a half-cent sales tax that benefits Jackson.

The bills are just part of a whopping \$ 2.5 billion tab that Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles says his state has been paying each year to provide social services to legal and illegal immigrants.

Angered that Florida has no authority to regulate the immigrants' arrival - that's a federal responsibility - Chiles says he will sue the federal government for reimbursement.

"Federal immigration policy has made a nightmare, a nightmare that has forced Florida and other local governments to bear the enormous costs," Chiles said at a news conference announcing the planned lawsuit.

On Monday, he also went to the U.S. Congress - to the House Government Operations Subcommittee on Information, Justice, Transportation and Agriculture - to ask for help in dealing with the costs of educating, treating and even imprisoning undocumented immigrants.

Officials from the federal Immigration and Naturalization Service have no comment on the pending litigation; similar lawsuits by other states in the past have failed.

But at Dade County's social services agencies, where harried workers struggle to provide care for immigrants and native-born residents, the lawsuit is drawing strong support.

"The federal government makes policies but doesn't bear the costs," said Tom Cerra, deputy superintendent of Dade's public schools.

A study released by Chiles estimates that 50,000 legal immigrants settle each year in Florida, where about 1 million of the 14 million residents are foreign-born.

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Many immigrants settle with family members and quickly find jobs. Others can spend **frustrating** months trying to find work, sometimes relying on government handouts in the meantime.

More troubling are the estimated 345,000 illegal aliens living in Florida. Once they settle in the state, **Florida's** schools and hospitals are bound by law to provide medical treatment and education. And when they break the law, the state must pay to prosecute.

Chiles proposes that federal officials deport the 2,000 to 4,000 illegal aliens now in the state's jails, saving Florida \$ 37 million a year. The feds have yet to agree.

Chiles estimates that the total bill for state services provided to undocumented immigrants was \$ 884 million last year.

Advocates for the immigrants say they sympathize with Chiles's **frustration** but fear that the lawsuit could signal hardening of attitudes and cutbacks in services.

"The human needs of these people shouldn't be lost sight of," said Steven Forester, a lawyer for the Haitian Refugee Center in Miami. "If Florida were to cut back services, it would just cause more suffering for them as well as higher costs for the state in the long run. It's like preventive medicine - spending a little now can save a lot down the road."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH940900185

Subject: **IMMIGRATION** (91%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (90%); SUITS & CLAIMS (90%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (89%); EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (89%); PUBLIC POLICY (89%); **IMMIGRATION** LAW (89%); LITIGATION (89%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); REGIONAL & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (78%); FAMILY (77%); EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION EMPLOYEES (77%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (77%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (73%); RESEARCH REPORTS (71%); MEDICAL TREATMENTS & PROCEDURES (70%); CORRECTIONS (69%); US CONGRESS (66%); PRESS CONFERENCES (65%); ECONOMIC CRISIS (55%)

Industry: EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (89%); HOSPITALS (89%); BUDGETS (79%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (77%); ACADEMIC MEDICAL CENTERS (77%)

Geographic: MIAMI, FL, USA (79%); FLORIDA, USA (96%); UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: March 31, 1994