

Oklahoma's crackdown on illegal immigration draws Texas lawmakers' interest

Crackdown on illegal immigration draws criticism, Texas interest

The Dallas Morning News
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February 14, 2008

OKLAHOMA CITY – Welcome to the nation's laboratory for a crackdown on illegal immigration. Last year, Oklahoma's Legislature passed, by huge margins, the nation's toughest law on illegal immigrants, making it a felony to harbor, transport, shelter or conceal undocumented immigrants.

Oklahoma state Rep. Randy Terrill, at a 2006 Senate hearing, says polls show that up to three out of four of the state's residents support his House Bill 1804.

This summer, the same law also will allow U.S. citizens to sue employers if they think they were fired in favor of illegal workers. Employers in the state say they already see the results: "A total lack of workers," said Doug Forrest, a Tulsa site-preparation contractor and golf course builder. "This is potentially sending our state into a recession."

Proponents of the law don't see such economic harm.

Meanwhile, some Texas lawmakers are already promising bills that mirror Oklahoma's House Bill 1804.

State Rep. Leo Berman, R-Tyler, said the Oklahoma measure has proved that even as Congress deadlocks on immigration, a state can protect itself against what he calls threats to public health and safety posed by a porous border.

"You don't have to round up 20 million illegal aliens," Mr. Berman said. "Stop the two free benefits you're giving them – free health care and a free education – and they'll go back across the Rio Grande."

Mr. Berman has introduced similar anti-illegal-immigration measures in the past but has been unsuccessful.

In December, Oklahoma Treasurer Scott Meacham said "some short-run pain" to that state's economy might occur, if reports of temporary labor shortages in construction, agriculture and oilfield services industries proved severe and long-lasting.

On Wednesday, Meacham deputy Tim Allen said there's been no clear trend to sales tax collections. In October, they dipped below expectations, then hit an estimate on the nose in November, rose in December and flopped again last month. Mr. Allen said that while growth of income taxes has slowed, that could be in line with the national economy.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and several Oklahoma business groups recently sued to overturn the law, saying it improperly steps on federal government turf.

Only one group has tried to track the law's effects on population. The Greater Tulsa Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, after checking with schools, churches, and bus lines with service to Mexico, estimated that between 15,000 and 25,000 illegal immigrants have left Tulsa County since the law was passed.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, there were between 50,000 and 75,000 illegal immigrants in Oklahoma nearly two years ago, with 20 times more – as many as 1.6 million – in Texas.

Jean Towell, leader of a Dallas group fighting illegal immigration, said she's spoken with five North Texas House Republicans who "are planning, as they said to me, to two-step with Oklahoma."

Two of them who could be reached Wednesday, Reps. Jim Jackson of Carrollton and Linda Harper-Brown of Irving, confirmed that they will be joint sponsors with Mr. Berman. A third, Rep. Jodie Laubenberg, R-Parker, said she hasn't seen particulars and won't commit yet, though she has "positive" feelings about the proposal.

However, Bill Hammond, president of the Texas Association of Business, said it would be "unfair to punish employers in Texas for the failure of Congress to act" on immigration.

"We would, of course, oppose any effort on the part of the Legislature to make immigration a state issue," said Mr. Hammond, whose group helped the GOP capture control of the Texas House in 2002. "It's a grave mistake for them to do so."

Rep. Rafael Anchía, D-Dallas, who joined forces with Mr. Hammond and others last year to quash bills discouraging illegal immigration, said this year's presidential race should discourage the Texas Legislature from following Oklahoma's lead next year. He said GOP voters rejected their party's hard-liners on immigration, U.S. Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-Colo., and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney. Also, 36 percent of Texas' population is Hispanic, compared with only 7 percent in Oklahoma.

Groups of Hispanics and civil libertarians also have gone to court trying to nullify the Oklahoma law, so far unsuccessfully. The state's Latino leaders say the law has spread fear and led to the death of at least one infant because his parents were afraid they would be deported if they took him to a clinic.

The law strongly nudges local and state police to help enforce federal immigration laws and requires state and local governments to determine whether someone is in the country legally before dispensing public assistance. Some exceptions are made, such as for emergency medical care. A final portion of the law goes into effect July 1, requiring private companies to verify the employment eligibility of all new hires.

"The fear, the terror, is pushing people further underground," said Patricia Fenell, who runs the Latino Community Development Agency, a Hispanic social services center on Oklahoma City's south side.

Alma Montez, who illegally migrated from Mexico a decade ago with her husband, is wary. She said her husband, who lost his \$19-an-hour job as a welder about the time the law took effect, has had to take a lower-paying job. He fears that she and their six children will be caught and deported while he's at work, Ms. Montez said.

"My son told me, 'Mommy, what happens if I stay in this school and the immigration take my Papi and you? What am I to do?' " she said. "I say, 'I don't know.' "

State Rep. Randy Terrill, a Republican from the Oklahoma City suburb of Moore, wrote the law. He conceded last week that family breakups will be wrenching, but said bad things also happen to relatives of other people who break laws, such as burglars.

"Somebody's decision to commit a crime ... frequently has an adverse impact on one's family," said Mr. Terrill, a lawyer and part-time government professor at Hillsdale Free Will Baptist College. "We don't use that as an excuse not to enforce the law."

But state Sen. Harry Coates calls Mr. Terrill "a mad scientist, and Oklahoma is his laboratory."

Mr. Coates of Seminole, an hour east of Oklahoma City, was the Legislature's sole Republican to vote against the bill. He said it is mean-spirited, hurts business, and inconveniences legal residents, especially elderly drivers who forget to renew their license and then must produce a birth certificate.

Mr. Terrill said recent state administrative changes should eliminate delays in renewing licenses.

Several Christian denominations have said they'll continue to urge parishioners to aid strangers, even though the law threatens those who transport or shelter "aliens" with at least one year in prison and/or at least a \$1,000 fine.

In November, messengers to the annual meeting of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma passed a resolution saying the law "will not change their ministry to any people," according to the Southern Baptist group's Web site.

Mr. Terrill said he doubts courts will convict anyone acting on altruistic motives.

He cites polls showing that as many as three out of four Oklahomans support the law. He predicted it will survive attempts to repeal it during the current session of the Oklahoma Legislature, which ends in May.

Mr. Coates conceded that passing a full or even partial repeal this session "is going to be an uphill fight."

One reason is people like Dan Howard, a Tulsa aircraft dealer.

"People up here got scared to death because ... crime went through the ceiling," said Mr. Howard, who founded an anti-illegal-immigration Web site. "We just want rule of law."