

Arizona Legislature to debate new set of bills aimed at immigration

PHOENIX - Arizona's Legislature will debate bills that question birthright citizenship, make hospitals check legal status of patients and require schools to keep tabs on students who are in the United States illegally.

The Senate Appropriations Committee Feb. 22 passed two Senate bills - S.B. 1308 and S.B.1309 - that sponsors hope will force the Supreme Court to rule on a challenge to the 14th Amendment's guarantee that all children born in the United States are citizens, sometimes called "birthright citizenship."

The Arizona lawmakers are questioning the clause of the amendment that reads: "subject to the jurisdiction thereof."

The committee also passed S.B. 1405, which would require hospitals to verify a patient's legal status before admitting them for non-emergency care. If the patient does not meet requirements of legal status, the hospital must report the person to the local federal immigration office.

Working into the wee hours Feb. 23, the committee also passed S.B. 1611 - the so-called "immigration omnibus" - which would require anyone applying for a federal public benefit to show proof of legal status. State Senate President Russell Pearce, author of S.B. 1070, introduced the 29-page bill a day before the session.

It also would make it a crime for undocumented immigrants to drive in the state. Parents would have to show proof of legal residency to enroll children in public or private schooling.

S.B. 1611 also would make consular identification cards issued by foreign governments an invalid form of identification.

The Arizona Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the Arizona bishops, expressed concern about this legislation before it was passed.

"We strongly believe that these bills, if enacted, would only create more problems for innocent and vulnerable populations in Arizona while creating a distraction from meaningful immigration reform," the conference said in a written statement.

"After all, it is only through substantive immigration reform at the federal level that these problems can be adequately addressed," according to the bishops' statement.

After the committee passed the bills, Ron Johnson, executive director of the Arizona Catholic Conference, said it was "far from certain" that the measures would make it out of the Senate.

"But even if they do, they have to start over again in the House," he said.

"They do nothing to heal the problem of immigration," Johnson added. "But they do create problems for vulnerable immigrants in our community - particularly the children, many of whom had no choice in coming to this country and have no connection to their country of origin."

Johnson took issue specifically with S.B. 1405, the measure that would require a hospital to verify a person's legal status before admitting them for non-emergency care, as well as S.B. 1611, which, among other things, requires schools to report the legal status of students.

"It's bad precedent when we start asking people in the private sector to check immigration status of a client," he said. "Let's let law enforcement be law enforcement."

Jose Robles, director of Hispanic ministry for the Phoenix Diocese, joined several hundred spectators at the Feb. 23 committee meeting.

"They relate this to open borders," he said of the legislators backing the immigration measures. "It's inaccurate and misleading," Robles said, noting that half of undocumented immigrants overstay visas.

"The language of these bills, the intent, it all conflicts with Catholic social teaching," he said. "There's no respect for the dignity of the vulnerable and the working people in our community."

Carmen Cornejo, a local Catholic who runs a bicultural communications business, said this kind of legislation will hurt Arizona residents – legal or not.

“It’s bad for the business environment in Arizona,” she said. “We all just want to get over this bad economy. We should be focusing on jobs and education.”

Referring to President Barack Obama’s State of the Union address earlier this year, she said Arizona should focus on developing “talented people,” wherever they come from.

“We cannot believe people are spending their time legislating against education,” said Cornejo, an advocate of a federal bill known as the DREAM Act. “Students need to focus on their studies and not be discouraged by these bills.”

DREAM Act – the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act – would give young people brought to the United States as children by their undocumented parents a path to citizenship under a strict set of requirements. Under the measure, if it were to pass Congress and be signed into law, they could regularize their legal status by going to college or joining the military.