Beat: News

Drivers Licenses for Illegal Immigrants in Maryland

Is it Public Safety or Detriment?

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USPA NEWS - The Maryland General Assembly is considering a series of three bills that would overturn the state´s current law prohibiting illegal immigrants from getting a Maryland driver´s license. The three bills all have a common goal, however, are as different as the complexity of the issue they address.

Delegate Jolene Ivey, D-47-Prince George´s County, has cross-filed SB 715, a bill by Senator Victor Ramirez´ in the House of Delegates as HB 789. These two identical bills titled “Maryland Highway Safety Act of 2013“ seek to create a two-tier drivers license system in Maryland. Tier one would be your standard issue driver´s license that is used today, and fully compliant with all federal Real ID requirements. The tier two licenses would provide a drivers license that while valid for operating a motor vehicle, would not be valid for federal purposes, such as ID at an airport or federal building.

Del. Ana Sol Gutierrez, D-18-Montgomery County, has filed HB 911 which would stop far short of Ivey's initially proposed full repeal, and only extend the current July 1, 2015 deadline to 2023 for illegal immigrants who currently hold Maryland driver's licenses.

The two bills by Delegates Ivey and Gutierrez that would allow illegal immigrants to possess Maryland driver's licenses drew a hearing room and overflow area packed full with Latinos on Wednesday, though the measure was met with hostility from some committee members.

Delegate Ivey said allowing illegal immigrants to have driver's licenses was a public safety issue. It ensures they know how to drive before getting on the road, makes it more likely they will have car insurance and would free police to pursue real crime, she said. If police stop a motorist and are unable to verify his or her identity, the officer is required to take the motorist in for booking.

Delegate Gutierrez said that extending the deadline in the current law is not only the right approach, but also more importantly, the right thing to do. She cited the immigration reform currently being debated in Washington, and said that those who have complied with the law and currently have a valid Maryland driver´s license should not be penalized because of a lack of clear federal policy. The Montgomery County Delegate also stated that many of the 93,000 people affected by her bill are in the process of becoming documented immigrants, however, due to constraints within the system, are still in process, and that “process“ may not be completed before the initial deadline of July 1, 2015.

Miriam Rosa testified through an interpreter that she had benefitted from being able to get a driver's license. She did not publicly say whether she was in the country legally. "Because I had a driver's license, I was able to start my own business," Rosa said. "I would like to keep on having my business by having my driver's license. I can also move my children back and forth, and I can sustain myself."

The opposition to changing the current law enacted in 2009

Del. Susan McComas, R-Harford County, pointed out that there was no requirement for background checks when getting a driver's license.

"We could have sex offenders coming in from other countries or ... potential terrorists coming here and getting driver's licenses," she said.

In fairness, it should be pointed out that Del. McComas example of sex offenders and felons from other countries, could easily happen under the current system with documented immigrants and U.S. Citizens coming from a different state. It is a flaw in the system, not a problem unique to illegal immigrants.

Del. Michael McDermott, R-Wicomico and Worcester counties, questioned whether anything had changed since the legislature passed

the 2009 law. He also worried immigrants would come back and claim the two-tiered licensing discriminates against them.

"I have a feeling that we're going to have people coming back and saying, 'Now I'm a second-tier citizen,' because they don't have a real driver's license," he said.

Each of the bills has strong support from fellow Democrats. But opponents, such as Del. Kelly Schulz, R-Frederick, say the measure could take away the incentive to become legal.

“When you give someone a state ID, it is an agreement for him or her to be here,“ Delegate Schultz said.

Delegate Ron George, R-30 “ Anne Arundel County, said to repeal or modify the current law is “absurd“. When we passed this law in 2009, Maryland was the only state east of the Rockies that issued a drivers license to someone that could not prove they were in this country legally. “The MVA was a partner in developing the model currently in place, and they are thankful for the way it has worked and the burdens it has relieved from their system,“ George said

The second term delegate points out that the current law is not, nor does it seek to be prejudicial against Latino´s and Hispanics in general as many allege, he has heard from authorities at TSA and ICE that state it has also helped control the presence of illegal Russian mobsters here in Maryland.

Maryland made it illegal to give licenses to illegal immigrants in 2009. Currently, Washington state, New Mexico and Illinois all permit illegal immigrants to obtain State issued driver´s licenses. A handful of other states are granting licenses to immigrants who qualify for work waivers under immigration laws relaxed by the White House last year.

Some are For, Some are Against

In addition to the oral testimony heard at Wednesday's hearing, many submitted written testimony on the two bills for the committee's consideration.

Written testimony in support of HB 789 was submitted by:

“¢ ACLU
“¢ Maryland Catholic Conference
“¢ Prince Georges County Executive Baker
“¢ Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett
“¢ Montgomery County Council
“¢ Joe Miedusiewski
“¢ Maryland Interfaith Legislative Committee

Written testimony in opposition to HB 789 was submitted by:

“¢ Maryland Department of Transportation
“¢ Maryland Troopers Association
“¢ Coalition for a Secure Driver´s License

Delegate Ana Sol Gutierrez's bill received full support from the Maryland Department of Transportation as well as a citizen of Greenbelt, Maryland.

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