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Immigration solution: E-Verify?

By LAWRENCE P. LATAIF

If employers don't know about E-Verify yet, they soon will, and where E-Verify lurks, a national ID card is not far behind.

In September, the government required that employers awarded federal contracts or subcontracts must participate in E-Verify, an Internet-based system that uses Social Security, Alien Registration and I-94 Arrival-Departure documents to determine if employees are authorized to work in the U.S. Thirteen states require E-Verify for certain businesses; legislation is pending in another four. The Center for Immigration Studies says that use of E-Verify has increased from one in 19 hires in 2007 to one in four.

Florida has yet to introduce legislation, but South Florida employers should pay close heed. More than 2 million residents, 38 percent, are foreign-born. Fourteen of the 20 cities with the highest percentages of foreign-born residents are in South Florida. The Census Bureau, in its Sept. 21 American Community Survey, showed that Palm Beach County defied the statewide decline in foreign-born population with an increase of more than 5 percent between 2007 and 2008.

E-Verify links with a national ID card in the immigration debate. A national ID card may be electronic or "biometric" with a fingerprint and photo, as Senate Immigration Subcommittee Chairman Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., recommends. The FBI is replacing its fingerprint file with a biometric sys-

It's a smart answer to a thorny problem.

tem that will include DNA records, 3-D facial imaging, palm prints and voice scans. Such technological developments strengthen the case for a national ID card. As part of a nationwide, mandatory E-Verify program, it could be the key to a compromise between the immigration extremes: sealing the borders and blanket amnesty.

Compromise will need to make citizenship harder, but possible, for those who have come here illegally, require screening to weed out criminals, terrorists and others deemed undesirable, and deter future illegal immigration. E-Verify is central to achieving these goals. While critics contend that the program deputizes employers, it is hard to find a more sensible option, given the difficulty of patrolling our 7,612-mile land border and 12,383-mile coastline. Also, since 1986 the Immigration Reform and Control Act has deputized employers by obligating them to wrestle with the burdens and ambiguities of the I-9 form, which lists 26 documents that can be used for verification. E-Verify simplifies all this.

Will a mandatory national employment verification system be perfect? Of course not. In a democracy, however, "perfection" cannot be an obstacle to the practical and necessary. The accuracy and speed of E-Verification are improving, too. Only 3 percent of workers fail to get immediate confirmation

of eligibility. That's down from 10.9 percent in 2006, and false E-Verify non-confirmations are just below 1 percent and falling. The average response time to E-Verification requests is now less than 4 seconds.

Would a national ID card invite Big Brother into our lives? One could argue that "Big Brother" is already here, through information kept by credit agencies, banks, Internet databases, Facebook and target marketers, not to mention credit card hackers, identity thieves and document forgers.

A national ID card offers a more reliable standard that may deter fraud and identity theft. If a supermarket requires a photo ID to make a credit card purchase, what is wrong with a national ID for something as important as getting a job? Eleven percent of adult citizens have no government-issued ID. A national ID card would put all workers on an equal footing.

The amnesty created by the 1986 legislation led to a rush of illegal immigration because employment verification requirements were toothless and ineffective. The Obama administration has declared that it will push for immigration reform in 2010. This new reform must be fair and reasonable, but tough and effective. There can be no workable policy without a baseline, and the best baseline would be E-Verify and a national ID card.

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