

KS Dems pitch their immigration reform bill - go after employers, not immigrants

Anxious not to sit out one of the year's bigger issues, Kansas House Democrats unveiled their own immigration reform plan yesterday. It counters more aggressive legislation that's been floated by Republicans.

Here are the components of the plan, which has not yet been introduced as a bill.

- 1) Resolution encouraging Congress to secure the borders and provide solutions to the problems caused by illegal immigration.

- 2) Require employers to use the federal E-Verify system to ensure all new hires are legal residents.

- 3) Toughen the penalties for employers who knowingly hire illegals.

- 4) Speed up the process by which non-citizens serving in the military can become citizens.

The proposals came with tougher talk than we've heard lately from Democrats on this issue.

"The federal system is broken," said House Minority Leader Dennis McKinney, a Greensburg Democrat. "Our plan is a reasonable approach to protect responsible Kansas employers by creating strong incentives to comply with state hiring laws."

The focus of the Democrats' proposals remains on ensuring that employers aren't knowingly hiring illegal immigrants to cut labor costs. Unlike the GOP plans, the Dems aren't going after the immigrants themselves. The Dems say they see immigration reform as a jobs issue.

"Winking at employers who knowingly hire illegal workers penalizes Kansas businesses that respect the law, Kansas citizens who want to work, and Kansas taxpayers who have to make up the difference, said Rep. Ann Mah, a Topeka Democrat. " If we are truly serious about the issue of illegal immigration, we must take action against employers who disobey the law."

The Republicans are more divided on how to handle the problem. Many - particularly in the House - are clamoring for aggressive reforms. Others, particularly moderate Republicans like Senate President Steve Morris, are reluctant to endorse onerous restrictions on business.

Two big GOP proposals on immigration are expected. Bills from Sen. Peggy Palmer and Rep. Brenda Landwehr, a Wichita Republican, would both allow state and local authorities to enforce federal immigration law; fine employers who knowingly hire illegals; require the use of E-Verify; and prohibit illegal immigrants from receiving state services like welfare. Making the whole debate more challenging is the fact that it's an election year for the entire legislature, and immigration is seen as a top voter issue.

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