

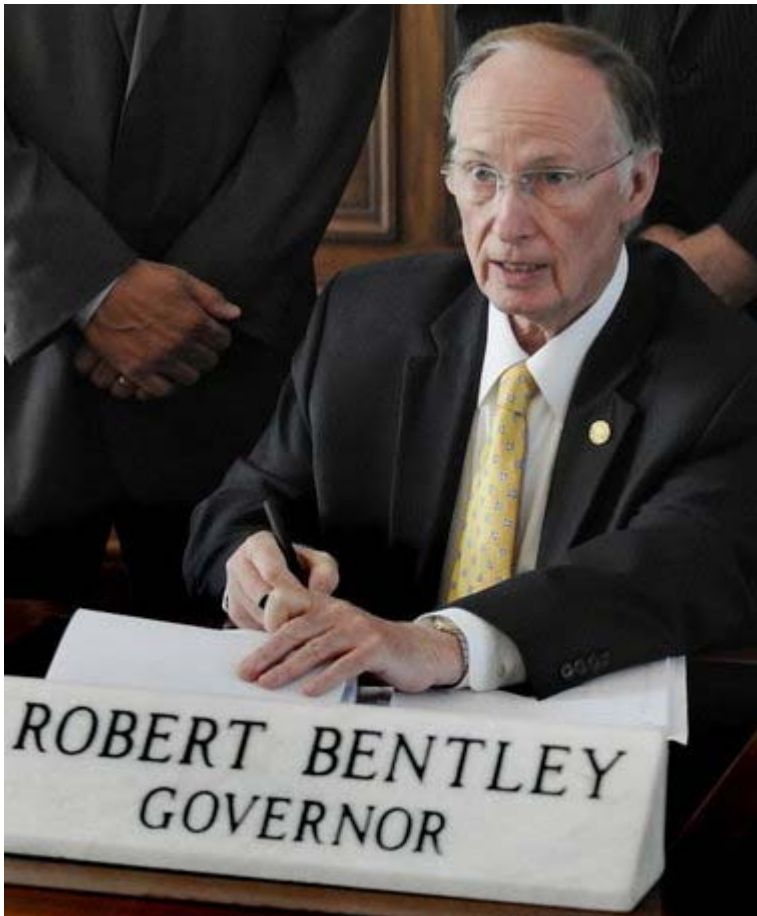


Critics say new Alabama immigration law will be costly

Published: Friday, June 10, 2011, 6:30 AM Updated: Friday, June 10, 2011, 11:17 AM



By **Eric Velasco -- The Birmingham News**



Gov. Robert Bentley signs into law a bill that, among many changes, allows police to arrest anyone on reasonable suspicion they are in the country illegally. (Mickey Welsh/Montgomery Advertiser)

Opponents of Alabama's sweeping new illegal immigration law said Thursday it will create a new civil rights struggle in a state already notorious for using the law to discriminate against minority residents.

"This draconian initiative is so oppressive, even Bull Connor would be impressed," said Wade Henderson, president and CEO of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, referring to the segregationist symbol of the civil rights movement in Birmingham in the 1960s.

While many groups across the country criticized Alabama's new immigration law as the most stringent in the county, supporters praised it for the same reason. Supporters said it promotes respect for the law, protects jobs for United States citizens and addresses a growing problem in the state.

House Bill 56 became law when Gov.

Robert Bentley signed it Thursday. Critics already are vowing to challenge it in court before it can take effect Sept. 1.

"It is a slap in the face to those who have fought long and hard to move this state forward in the struggle for civil rights," said Isabel Rubio, executive director of the Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama.

The law requires proof of legal residence on the job, at school and when obtaining state benefits.

It also allows police to arrest anyone on reasonable suspicion they are in the country illegally, requires courts to void contracts involving undocumented immigrants and requires employers to use the federal E-Verify system to check applicants' legal status.

"It turns Alabama into a police state where anyone could be required to show their citizenship papers," said Cecillia Wang, a lawyer with the American Civil Liberties Union's Immigrant Rights Project.

Critics said the new law is aimed at Latinos. It will promote ethnic profiling, make undocumented residents afraid to report crimes or workplace exploitation and effectively turn school officials into immigration agents, they said.

"It is a radical departure from the concepts of fairness and equal treatment under the law," said Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum. "It makes it a crime, quite literally, to give immigrants a ride without checking their legal status."

State Rep. Micky Hammon, R-Decatur, who sponsored the new law with state Sen. Scott Beason, R-Gardendale, said it will not have the broad effects that critics predict.

"There will be no profiling," he said. "We will not tolerate that. We welcome legal immigrants with open arms. But we can no longer have two separate societies, one that follows the law and one living below the law."

Supporters of the new law say they recognize the U.S. is a nation of immigrants.

"However, illegal immigrants have become a drain on our state resources and a strain on our taxpaying, law-abiding citizens," said Bill Armistead, Alabama Republican Party chairman.

Alabama's new law could have unintended consequences and be costly to enforce, said Gary Palmer, president of the Alabama Policy Institute, a conservative group that generally favors illegal immigration reform.

Some aspects such as the E-Verify requirement, are good, he said. But "it will be interesting to see" if native Alabamians will flock to lower-wage jobs now filled by immigrants, he said.

"I think something had to be done," he said. "We'll see if this is what we need."

Lawsuit planned

Several groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union and the Southern Poverty Law Center, said they would file suit against the Alabama law this summer.

"This law is twisted, mean-spirited and racist," said Mary Bauer, legal director of the Montgomery-based SPLC. "It also is clearly unconstitutional."

In Arizona, which passed a similar but less comprehensive law in 2010, enforcement was blocked by a federal judge during a legal challenge filed by the U.S. Justice Department.

Lawsuits are pending in three other states with recent anti-immigration laws, Utah, Indiana and Georgia.

Hammon said House Bill 56 was carefully crafted to survive a legal challenge.

"We are confident it will stand up constitutionally," he said. "We are not taking over the immigration process. We are merely aiding and assisting the federal government in enforcing immigration law."

Several critics said Alabama's new law will be costly to a state that already is reeling financially.

The Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association estimated that labor shortages stemming from a new immigration law in that state could have a \$300 million impact on its agriculture industry, according to the SPLC.

Also, organized boycotts in Arizona over the past year have cost that state an estimated \$750 million in convention and tourism business, said Clarissa Martinez, a director with the Hispanic advocacy group, National Council of La Raza.

No plans have been set, but similar grass-roots action is likely for Alabama, especially given its racial history, Henderson said.

Critics of Alabama's law said immigration reform is needed, but on the federal level. State officials should be urging their members of Congress to take action, they said.

"We are confident that justice will prevail," Rubio said. "In the meantime, HICA will continue to connect the Hispanic community to economic and civic opportunities and to advocate for immigration reform on the federal level."

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