

Big Brother's Watching

The reality of national IDs

Big Brother may start tracking you here in Oregon.

A federal law requiring citizens and immigrants to prove U.S. citizenship or legal status for a national driver's license will make tracking people's whereabouts, finances and consumer records easier for the federal government.

The Real ID Act passed by Congress in 2005 enforces national standards for state-issued driver's licenses. But it's more than a national driver's license. It affects the U.S. immigrant community by tightening asylum and deportation laws, changing visa limits and helping build a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border.

The recent immigration raid of Portland's Del Monte plant highlighted the feds' effort to crack down on immigrants. Federal investigators arrested 167 workers suspected of using illegal documents for employment. A grand jury indicted three of them on charges of illegal immigration and document fraud.

Real ID is intended to improve national security, but many Oregonians think it infringes on personal freedom, polices immigrants and burdens the state budget.

The U.S. Senate passed Real ID on a 100-0 vote as a rider on an emergency military spending and tsunami relief bill, a move that made it impossible for senators to vote against it. The act demands state compliance by the end of 2009 and requires U.S. residents to have national IDs to board planes, enter federal buildings, open bank accounts and access social services. Oregon is not in compliance.

"In the U.S. we've always had the freedom to do what we want as long as we play by the rules," said Christopher Calabrese, counsel to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Technology and Liberty Program. "Having a national ID card really changes that. Now you need to go to the government to get permission — to get a job, to travel, to collect Medicare."

According to Andrea Meyer, ACLU's local legislative director, Real ID passed as an anti-immigration measure. "Driver's licenses should be used to determine if drivers know the rules of the road," she said. They "should not be used as immigration documents."



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— Andrea Meyer, ACLU

Along with 10 other states, Oregon currently allows residents to obtain a driver's license without proving lawful immigration status.

Claire Syrett, ACLU's southern district field organizer, said Real ID "requires everyone to jump through hoops." She said it places an added burden on immigrants whose naturalization and identification documents are often difficult to obtain and take Oregon DMV officials longer to decipher. Immigrants may have to wait for weeks or even months for document verification, which could mean going without a job for some time.

Obtaining the national driver's license requires Oregon residents to gather a whole slew of documents, including proof of legal status, original birth certificates, Social Security cards and proof of residency, that the DMV will verify and store in a national database.

"Immigrants feel they are being persecuted," said Aeryca Steinbauer of CAUSA, Oregon's statewide immigrant rights coalition. "Raids are already a tax on the community, and now people

have to be fearful to get in the car and drive to work or pick up their kids," she said.

"Oregonians rely on immigrants for labor," Steinbauer said. Real ID may affect Oregon's state economy since finding employment will be more difficult for immigrants, she said.

tribute to occupations concentrated in low-wage farming, cleaning, construction and food preparation jobs. OCPP determined that undocumented immigrants contribute roughly \$160 million in federal and state taxes annually.

Real ID policies will make it more difficult for immigrants to get jobs and obtain access to earned benefits like Medicare and Social Security. ACLU's Syrett said Real ID is really just a front to see if the government "can weed out undocumented workers."

Meyer added that Real ID's proof of lawful presence may also deter many immigrants from complying with the law. "We will have more people driving without knowing the rules of the road and without insurance," she said.

The federally unfunded Real ID also raises concerns about identity theft.

"Turning driver's licenses into national identification cards puts our very personal information at risk" said ACLU's Meyer. Real ID creates a massive national database shared across state lines. Meyer pointed out that a database this size is an obvious target for identity theft criminals. "The Legislature should be held accountable for protecting citizens."

Local state Sen. Floyd Prozanski shared Meyer's concern for protecting Oregon residents from identity theft. "I'm very concerned about safeguarding personal information," he said.

Prozanski recently sponsored the Oregon Consumer Identity Theft Protection Act, which helps prevent identity thieves from illicitly acquiring personal information.

According to Prozanski, "it's premature to move forward at the state level until requirements at the federal level are made clear." He said the state does not want to waste money complying with a law that's unclear.

"It's crazy that something this absurd passed law," CAUSA's Steinbauer said. "It's a goldmine for identity theft," she said, and "it's an unfunded mandate to the state that will cost millions, if not billions." Finally, she said, it leaves Oregon's legal immigrants "feeling criminalized for being here." **EW**

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