

Immigrant advocates: 'Attrition through enforcement' immigration policy already a reality

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Immigration advocates said Monday that an "attrition through enforcement" immigration strategy is nothing new, and already interferes with the daily lives of undocumented and their families, including U.S.-born children.

The term "attrition through enforcement" was first used by immigration restrictionists in 2003 and implemented in 2005, Michelle Waslin of the Immigration Policy Center said on a conference call Monday. Waslin added that immigration restrictionist organizations like the Federation for American Immigration Reform, the Center for Immigration Studies and Numbers USA have sought to market the strategy by arguing it would prove less expensive and more reasonable than mass deportation.

Waslin said the strategy would force undocumented immigrants to leave, regardless of how long they have been in the U.S. and how this impacts U.S.-born children. She added that citizens will pay more in taxes to implement the strategy, which also impacts businesses.

Jonathan Blazer of the American Civil Liberties Union said during the call that "states have served as major laboratories of experimentation for [immigration] restrictionists who seek to push the bills farther and farther."

He added that because language in state bills is copied word for word and introduced simultaneously, the movement is "a nationally coordinated effort through" groups like the Federation for American Immigration Reform, known as FAIR, the Immigration Reform Law Institute, State Legislators for Legal Immigration and the American Legislative Exchange Council.

Three Florida state representatives are current members of State Legislators for Legal Immigration, including Rep. Gayle Harrell, R-Port St. Lucie, who filed a bill in the current legislative session that would mandate the use of an employment authorization program known as E-Verify.

Blazer added that Alabama's new law targets children and parents seeking to enroll in schools, restricts commerce and prohibits business transactions between individuals and state or local governments. According to him, 2012 has seen a flood of E-Verify bills and measures that reduce benefits.

Waslin said that Arizona's S.B. 1070 immigration law states its intent is to make "attrition through enforcement the public policy of all state and local government agencies in Arizona." She added that state Sen. Scott Beason of Alabama, a major proponent of that state's immigration enforcement measure, has said his law is doing what it is supposed to do.

Karen Tumlin — a managing attorney at the National Immigration Law Center, which "works to defend the rights of immigrants and their families" — said the strategy "should be understood as a state plan to cause the exodus of a particular ethnic group, Latinos," and as "a direct attempt to change longstanding legal precedent."

She added that state legislators knew these laws "were likely to be deemed unconstitutional," but "they didn't care" because the goal is "to bring on a legal fight to overturn longstanding case law."

Tumlin added that for these legislators, "critical difference between immigration status and ethnicity didn't matter."

"In Alabama, we've seen how this legislation can provide the societal cover for private citizens to engage in discriminatory behavior. We have seen reminders of the bad old days," Tumlin said, adding that Latinos, "regardless of immigration status," have been subjected to harassment when "going about their daily lives."

Heidi Beirich — director of the Intelligence Project at the Southern Poverty Law Center, also involved in stopping immigration laws in Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina — added that state laws started at the local level in places like Hazelton, Penn., driven by FAIR to "get harsh anti-immigration laws on the books."

She also added that Alabama Sen. Beason has worked with Kris Kobach, the current Kansas secretary of state who is linked to the Immigration Reform Law Institute, which works with FAIR, Numbers USA and the Center for Immigration Studies.

Beirich added that there has been close collaboration between tea party groups, FAIR and Numbers USA.

In mid-January the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights issued a report that shows that while groups like FAIR, Numbers USA, the Center for Immigration Studies and others have seen a decline in membership and financial support, there has been a rise of "anti-immigrant activism by the Tea Parties."

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