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Effort to help illegal immigrants get driver's licenses draws protest

Opponents raise issue of terrorism; supporters say bill would aid workers

By Ivan Penn
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A proposal to help undocumented immigrants in Maryland obtain their driver's licenses came under fire yesterday because of concerns the measure could make it easier for terrorists to acquire identification from the state.

Family members of Sept. 11 victims and other opponents of the bill launched a campaign against the legislation in a news conference and during a packed hearing before the House Judiciary Committee.

"This is a situation that is intolerable," said Wilton A. Sekzer, a board member of the 911 Families for a Secure America who lost his son in the World Trade Center attack, during the morning news conference. "Why are we making it comfortable for illegal aliens to come here?"

The proposal comes at an interesting time. Lawmakers in Virginia recently passed legislation to toughen regulations for acquiring licenses. The legislation in Virginia is awaiting the governor's signature.

Latino activists in Maryland have made this legislation one of their top priorities this year, saying it affects many people in their community who are unable to legally drive - hurting their employment prospects. Such workers have lived in Maryland for years but do not have legal status to remain in the state or the country, and dozens filled the hearing room yesterday in support of the bill.

Proponents want the state to allow Maryland residents - including those who do not have legal status or documentation to support their legal status - to be able to receive driver's licenses by using certified foreign documents from their native countries. The documents would include foreign birth certificates, passports, military documents or national identification cards.

Driver's licenses, supporters argue, would help ensure motorists are trained and driving with insurance. In addition, they would serve as identification for law enforcement, contributing to public safety.

"It's not a 9/11. It's not terrorism," said Del. Ana Sol Gutierrez, a Montgomery County Democrat. "All immigrants are not terrorists."

Denise Hammond, a member of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, told the committee that the country depends on undocumented residents to support the economy. Since this class of immigrants continues to live in Maryland's communities, Hammond said she believes it would help national security to have each person on record.

"I recognize this bill is not ideal," Hammond said. "But they watch our kids. They clean our houses. ... If there was a mass deportation, our economy would collapse."

The legislation has strong support from some committee members, including the chairman, Del. Joseph F. Vallario Jr., a Prince George's Democrat. But others criticized the measure for giving benefits that should be reserved for citizens or immigrants who have permission to be in the United States.

"You want to make it so that an illegal alien can get a driver's license," said Del. Herbert H. McMillan, an Anne Arundel County Republican. "How can you possibly tell me this bill enhances our national security?"

Opponents said states should be focusing on efforts to protect the nation against illegal immigration.

"If you are not here legally, you don't belong here," said Robert Gresh, a member of the Maryland Coalition Against Terrorism, a 15-member group that formed to fight the bill. "You don't have a right to have a valid identification from the state of Maryland."