

Posted on Wed, Jan. 28, 2004

Driver's license bill spurs state march in Kansas

BY SARAH BAHARI
The Wichita (Kan.) Eagle

TOPEKA - Hundreds of immigrants and their allies rallied Tuesday in support of a bill that would allow undocumented immigrants to obtain Kansas driver's licenses.

About 550 people from Wichita traveled to Topeka in six buses and more than 50 cars. They joined about 400 others around the state.

"I hope the senators understand what we're looking for and what we need," Javier Magdaleno, a father of five, said. Magdaleno entered the country illegally in 1979, but became a citizen in 1996.

Supporters say the bill, which would create a temporary license for undocumented immigrants, would improve state roads and highways.

Opponents contend it would weaken homeland security efforts, reward undocumented immigrants and attract more

The bill narrowly passed the House last year but stalled in the Senate. On Tuesday, the Senate Judiciary Committee heard impassioned arguments from both sides.

Joan Wagon, secretary of the state Department of Revenue, said the department's role is not to enforce immigration law but to ensure driver safety.

"It is in the best interests of the public that all drivers be licensed without regard to their immigration status," she said.

Unlicensed drivers cannot buy insurance, which endangers all drivers, advocates say.

In the past decade, the Hispanic population in the Wichita metropolitan area more than doubled, from 19,793 in 1990 to 40,000 in 2000, according to U.S. census figures.

"Quite bluntly, we aren't going anywhere," said Elias Garcia, executive director of the Kansas Advisory Committee on Immigration Affairs. "This is our home."

Other supporters include Gov. Kathleen Sebelius, the Kansas Catholic Conference and law enforcement officials in Olathe and Pittsburg. Wichita Police Chief Norman Williams and Sedgwick County Sheriff Gary Steed have remained neutral on the issue.

Opponents include 9/11 Families for a Secure America, an organization for people who lost loved ones in the Sept. 11

and the Federation for American Immigration Reform.

Pete Gadiel, whose 23-year-old son, James, died in the terrorist attacks, asked the committee to consider what such a law would send. He called the bill "indecent" and an insult to those murdered on Sept. 11.

"You could find no better way to tell the people who lost loved ones that those losses mean nothing. Nothing," G

Sen. Ed Pugh, R-Wamego, a member of the Senate committee, said he cannot justify voting for the bill. His constituents strongly oppose it, he said.

"Why would legislators pass a bill that allows someone who is breaking the law to continue breaking the law?" he asked. "Why would we aid and abet that illegal status?"

While the committee met, about 1,000 people marched from a nearby church to the Statehouse steps in blustery weather.

Carrying signs and occasionally chanting "We pay taxes," they listened to emotional speeches by supporters.

"We came here to help build this country," said Emira Palacios, an organizer with Sunflower Community Action, a bill sponsor. "Not to destroy it."

Paula Esparza, an undocumented immigrant who lives in Topeka, said he and others need driver's licenses.

"We all work. We all pay taxes," he said. "We have kids we have to drive to school. We have to drive to work."

If undocumented immigrants do crash their cars, they often leave the scene before police arrive because they are afraid. Joaquin Delatorre, who moved here from Mexico 17 years ago.

"They don't have a choice," he added.

The state Legislature has debated the issue since 2000, when a law took effect requiring people to present proof of residency before obtaining a driver's license. Lawmakers enacted that law in response to complaints that undocumented immigrants from Colorado were traveling to Kansas to obtain licenses.

After the rally, supporters packed the first floor of the Statehouse, then dropped off about 700 signed thank-you cards at the governor's office. Sebelius was not at the Capitol on Tuesday morning, said her spokeswoman, Nicole Corcoran.

"Governor Sebelius," the cards read. "You are going to make Kansas a safer, more secure state for all the people. Your important immigrant contributions are to this state."

Reach Sarah Bahari at 268-6290 or sbahari@wichitaeagle.com.