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In-state tuition, driving privileges urged for NJ illegal immigrants

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A panel on immigration policy recommended that the state issue driver's licenses to illegal immigrants, allow all immigrant children living in New Jersey to pay in-state tuition at state colleges and create a commission on immigrant policy.

Gov. Jon S. Corzine said he supports in-state tuition rates for all New Jersey students, but said the license proposal needs to be addressed by the federal government.

"There's a fundamental flaw to letting people drive without insurance and licenses," Corzine said. "Nevertheless, New Jersey has very strict laws on driver's licenses. We need a national policy on how we identify people, not state by state."

A report by the Governor's Blue Ribbon Advisory Panel on Immigrant Policy says allowing illegal immigrants to get licenses will improve road safety, since licensed drivers have to prove an ability to drive. The report takes particular issue with the national REAL ID legislation, which sets minimum standards for state-issued licenses and identification and requires applicants to prove their citizenship to get licenses.

J. David Alcantara, an Atlantic City immigration lawyer, said licenses would obligate immigrants to get insurance, give them a valid form of identification, and also reduce the amount of litigation resulting from traffic stops involving illegal immigrants.

"We're going to see the overload of cases in municipal courts decrease by about 5 to 10 percent," he said.

Albert Gutierrez, a member of the panel, said the governor's opposition to the recommendation didn't surprise him.

Gutierrez, the president and CEO of Shore Memorial Hospital, said, "I understood out of all the items that we identified in the report, that that would be the most controversial."

Currently, the report says, students who can't prove they are citizens must pay higher out-of-state tuition rates at state colleges, even if they have attended New Jersey schools their whole lives.

Some lawmakers have proposed allowing immigrants to attend college at in-state rates since 2002, but it has never gotten a full legislative vote.

The current proposal, in front of Senate and General Assembly committees since January 2008, would allow the reduced rate if the student had attended at least three years of high school in New Jersey and earned a diploma here. An undocumented immigrant would also qualify if the person filed an affidavit saying they had applied for legal standing or would as soon as possible.

The panel also recommends that the governor create a new commission to deal with immigrant policy. The commission, which would be called the Commission on New Americans, would oversee any immigrant policy made by the government, and would comprise representatives from the government, as well as community groups, charities, advocacy groups, businesses, unions, academia and faith-based groups.

The commission's mission would include reaching out to immigrants and making the government more multicultural and multilingual to make it easier for immigrants to use its services.

Gutierrez said the lack of such a commission in the past "has led to some of the complexities we have now with immigrants."

"We identified in our research that part of the challenges that immigrants have in New Jersey is because there is no comprehensive, well-organized view on how to appropriately welcome them to America," he said.

Corzine created the Blue Ribbon Advisory Panel on Immigrant Policy in 2007 to help ease the transition to America for

the state's immigrant population. The U.S. Census counted more than 1.7 million immigrants in New Jersey in 2006. The panel estimated the state had 400,000 illegal immigrants.

About 20 percent of the state is foreign born, one of the nation's highest percentages. In a 2006 survey, 45.9 percent of New Jersey immigrants are from Latin America, while 30 percent are Asian and 18.6 percent are European.

About 73 percent of the state's Asian and 47 percent of the Hispanic population are foreign-born, the report said, while India, Mexico, China, the Philippines, and Columbia were the top five origins of New Jersey immigrants.

A study by the Eagleton Institute of Politics' Program on Immigration and Democracy found that foreign-born workers' incomes are clustered at the high and low ends of the scale. While many work in low-skill fields, about 40 percent of the state's scientists and engineers with higher degrees are foreign-born.

The survey also found immigrants earn 23 percent of the state's wages, and own about 20 percent of the state's businesses.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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