

Should undocumented residents get driver's licenses? A coalition is pushing for it at the Capitol.



Veronica Orellana of Worthington, Minn., speaks to media and a crowd of supporters about how her family would be helped by a proposal to allow undocumented residents to obtain a drivers license at the State Capitol in St. Paul on Thursday, Feb. 21, 2019. The Democratic-backed proposal faces its most difficult challenge in the state Senate, which is controlled by Republicans. (Dave Orrick / Pioneer Press)

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Democratic Minnesota House lawmakers on Thursday introduced a plan to allow undocumented Minnesota residents — those in the country illegally — to get driver's licenses.

But it wasn't just Democrats.

Business leaders, clergy, some in the law enforcement community, and at least one Republican lawmaker stood inside the Capitol Thursday to espouse the idea.

Gov. Tim Walz, a Democrat, supports it as well, and its passage looks promising in the Democratic-Farmer-Labor-controlled House.

But the leader of the Republican-controlled Senate said he doesn't think it'll happen.

Here's what you need to know.

WAS ALLOWED, THEN NOT

It used to be that undocumented residents could get a driver's license just like everyone else.

That changed in 2003, and today in Minnesota, you have to be able to provide documentation that you're in the country legally.

The new rule was proposed in the post-Sept. 11, 2001, years by the Department of Public Safety for security reasons.

Here's how the department argued it at the time, according to its rule-making proposal: "The license is a key link to public safety, privacy and national security. For the safety, security and peace of mind of its residents, Minnesota must produce a recognizable reliable source of identification in issuing licenses and, at the same time, reduce exposure to identity theft and fraud. To protect the integrity of Minnesota licenses, the Department believes it must make permanent changes that strengthen identity and residency requirements."

The change was finalized under Republican Gov. Tim Pawlenty but had begun under Gov. Jesse Ventura of the Independence Party.

WHAT ARE THEY PROPOSING NOW?

Specifically, [the bill, led by House Majority Leader Ryan Winkler](#), DFL-Golden Valley, would create a "noncompliant license" that could be obtained by providing any of a number of documents that range from an application for asylum to a recent "home utility services hook-up work order."

The licenses would not comply with federal Real ID national security requirements, so they would not be accepted at airports or border crossings.

Supporters of the proposed change say there could be tens of thousands of people in the state who could qualify.

WHO WANTS IT AND WHY?

Here are some of the arguments in favor of it:

Business: Dave Buck, president of the Minnesota Milk Producers, said immigrants have become an essential part of his industry's labor force. Without the ability to drive, that rural workforce is in jeopardy. "They're hard-working very family oriented, and we appreciate the help they've provided us," he said. "But they can't hop on a bus or light rail."

Public safety: Several Minneapolis and St. Paul police officers stood with supporters at the rally. The argument goes like this: If you can't get a driver's license, you won't take a driver ed course and learn to drive safely. Plus, you won't have insurance. All that adds up to more dangerous roads.

Decency: "It's a moral imperative," said Archbishop Bernard Hebda of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. Driving without a license in constant worry of being pulled over is a "terrible fear to impose on people," he said.

Several immigrants spoke in terms of how it affects their family. Jenny Srey, an immigrant from southeast Asia, said she lives in Farmington, but drives to see her seven siblings and 15 cousins daily. "That commute is routine for me," but not for relatives who can't get a license," she said.

BUT ... THEY'RE HERE ILLEGALLY?

Supporters say they know they're in the middle of an impassioned national debate on immigration, and the very existence of people here illegally is a major problem for many. Their response: They can't do anything about the status of people already living here.

"The failure of our elected officials in passing comprehensive immigration reform means we must act," Hebda said.

'SMALL' CHANCE IN SENATE

When asked what the chances are of the plan passing the Senate, Majority Leader Paul Gazelka, R-Nisswa, replied: "small."

"We would be slow to warm up to it," he said.

"The waiting period for those that want to get (driver's licenses) right now is over 80 days," he said. "I want to focus on that first. All legal immigrants would be in that group. ... My concern would be another issue rewarding people that are here illegally. Let's focus first on the problems we have for people who are here legally."

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