



E-Verify extended for three years

BY RAJU CHEBIUM • GANNETT WASHINGTON BUREAU • OCTOBER 21, 2009

WASHINGTON - A system that lets employers check whether newly hired workers are in the country legally has won a three-year extension from Congress.

But the debate over the E-Verify program is far from over. New Jersey government officials strongly oppose it.

In addition to renewing the controversial voluntary program, Congress voted Tuesday to approve \$137 million for it over three years as part of a \$43 billion spending bill for the Homeland Security Department. The bill now heads to the White House, where President Barack Obama is expected to sign it into law soon.

"This bill provides unprecedented support for the E-Verify program, investing in its growth and the improvement of its accuracy," Rep. David Price, the North Carolina Democrat who wrote the Homeland Security spending bill, said in a statement Wednesday.

Robert Menendez, D-N.J., has blocked E-Verify in the past. He didn't this time because he would have had to block the entire spending bill, depriving New Jersey of tens of millions of dollars for emergency operations and port, urban and transit security.

"Ultimately, it's important to have an employee verification system that is accurate and cost-efficient," Menendez said in a statement. "In its current form, this particular system continues to misidentify U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents, and it can create a financial burden on small business, slowing job creation as we recover from this economic crisis."

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, a former Arizona governor, supports E-Verify, but there's deep skepticism in Congress.

Lawmakers rejected an attempt by Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., to make the program permanent.

House and Senate negotiators on the final version of the Homeland Security spending bill added language requiring the Government Accountability Office to again analyze the system and how it's used.

Many lawmakers say E-Verify should be part of a comprehensive immigration reform package. Obama has expressed support, but overhauling the nation's immigration system is unlikely this year, as Congress tackles health care reform.

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Since 2006, Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, Minnesota, Missouri, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina and Utah have passed legislation requiring some or all employers to use E-Verify, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

New Jersey state Sen. Richard Merkt, R-Morris, introduced an E-Verify bill in January, but it has gone nowhere. The former gubernatorial candidate's bill

ould require employers to check the employment eligibility of new workers within 90 days of hiring. Employers would be fined up to \$30,000 for each illegal immigrant they hire.

In March, an immigration policy advisory group appointed by Gov. Jon Corzine recommended against requiring New Jersey businesses to use E-Verify. The group cited a 2006 study from the Social Security Administration that showed 18 million of the 435 million records in its database contain errors.

"If the database is flawed to begin with, the whole program is flawed," Charles "Shai" Goldstein, executive director of the New Jersey Immigration Policy Network, said in a telephone interview.

Homeland Security officials say E-Verify is used by more than 126,000 employers nationwide, with 1,000 businesses joining each week. Federal contractors and subcontractors are required to use E-Verify. The Homeland Security agency says the program is 94 percent accurate