



June 1, 2009

Wisconsin would be 2nd state to issue driver's cards to illegal immigrants

By *SCOTT BAUER*
Associated Press Writer

MADISON — Wisconsin may soon join Utah as the only states to issue illegal immigrants special cards that allow them to drive but not get other rights that traditional licenses hold.

The plan was included in Wisconsin's state budget approved by a Democratic-controlled committee on Friday. It is subject to approval by the full Legislature and Gov. Jim Doyle, perhaps as soon as next week.

Utah is the only state with a two-tiered system like what is being proposed in Wisconsin, according to The American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators. About 40,000 drivers in Utah have the cards, which were created with that state's program in 2005 as an attempt to end voter fraud among illegal immigrants who were receiving regular licenses.

Tennessee ended a driver certification program after two years in 2006 after federal investigators found that some testing centers were selling driver's licenses and certificates to out-of-state illegal immigrants.

Washington, Illinois and New Mexico are the only states that allow illegal immigrants to receive driver's licenses. Maryland used to allow it, but a new ban on such licenses took effect Monday.

In Hawaii, illegal immigrants can get a state ID, but not a driver's license.

The Wisconsin law was modeled after the one in Utah, which has proved successful, said Christine Neumann-Ortiz, executive director of Voces de la Frontera, a Milwaukee-based group that advocates for immigrants.

A coalition of about 20 groups, including the Wisconsin State Troopers Association and the police chiefs of Milwaukee and Madison, formed to advocate for the driving cards.

"It makes total sense," Neumann-Ortiz said Monday. "First and foremost it's really a public safety issue because it will ensure that more people driving are tested, licensed and insured."

But Republican critics argue issuing the cards will open the door to illegal immigrants voting and obtaining other rights.

That's nonsense, Neumann-Ortiz said.

"It's not in the self interest of people who don't have legal status to vote," she said. "If you do that, it's a felony and you can never adjust your status in the future."

The state estimates that about 60,000 people will apply for the cards. Many of them are immigrants who are trying to obtain legal status but are caught somewhere in the system, Neumann-Ortiz said.

States like Wisconsin are looking at the issue in light of the federal 2005 REAL ID law that required a person's immigration status to be checked before they are issued a driver's license. Only those drivers who are citizens or have legal status can receive a driver's license.

Under the new proposal, the driver cards would offer much more limited rights than a license. While they could be used to drive, the cards could not be used as official identification to vote, board an airplane or enter a federal building.

Police would be barred from checking on someone's immigration status simply because they possess the identification. And insurance companies could not cancel or refuse coverage to someone simply for holding one of the cards.

Doyle didn't propose the idea even though the Democratic-controlled budget committee approved it. The governor has said he believes it may have merit, but he's not saying whether he would support it.
