

California Democrats unveil bold immigration legislation

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(Photo: Richard Lui/The Desert Sun)

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California Democratic leaders on Tuesday unveiled bold immigration legislation that could drastically enhance the protection and civil rights of the state's undocumented immigrants, arguing that immigrants have been the backbone of the Golden State for generations.



The package, titled, "Immigrants Shape California," is composed of 10 Assembly and Senate bills, which include:

- Expanding access to healthcare coverage to all Californians despite immigration status.
- Amending the Unruh Civil Rights Acts to make it unlawful for businesses to discriminate people based on their language or immigration status.
- Protecting the records of undocumented children from unauthorized disclosure to federal immigration officials.

Members of the state legislature on Tuesday described California as a pioneer in advancing immigrant rights, particularly since Congress failed to forge ahead with federal reform.

They challenged the rest of the nation to follow suit.

"Today we remind the nation that California is different," said Senate President Pro Tempore Kevin de León, a Los Angeles Democrat. "We are doing the work of federal Congress."

Assemblyman Eduardo Garcia, a Coachella Democrat, said the extensive legislation can grow California's economy and holds particular importance in the Coachella Valley, where immigrants form a critical part of the workforce.

"When we look at our region, the agriculture, hospitality and tourism industries are the driving forces for business in the Coachella Valley," he said. "It makes the legislation that much more important."

But critics have reservations about the amount of state resources these bills would require.

"The programs proposed today come with big price tags attached and they come on the same day that the Legislative Analyst warns California may face a \$1.3 billion budget shortfall this year," said Amanda Fulkerson, spokeswoman for the state's Assembly Republican Caucus in a statement to The Desert Sun.

"We encourage the bill authors to make clear how they would fund these programs and identify any other programs (that) will suffer cutbacks as a result. Then, the public can make an informed choice on how their taxpayer dollars are being spent."

Assemblyman Chad Mayes, a Yucca Valley Republican, declined to comment on the proposed legislation.

Congressman Raul Ruiz, a Palm Desert Democrat who's district includes the Coachella Valley, did not respond to emails for comment.

Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins (D-San Diego), Senate President de León (D-Los Angeles) and Assembly members Luis Alejo (D-Salinas) and Das Williams (D-Carpinteria) led Tuesday's press conference in the state capitol room.

They were flanked by community leaders and undocumented immigrants, some of whom shared their personal stories.

As the name of the legislation suggests, leaders made clear that the state's economic and social prosperity has been built on the backs of immigrants from all regions of the world.

"Our infrastructure, our railroads, our roads and bridges were built by immigrants," de León said, adding that they've contributed to the arts, and to the music and technology industries.

"This is who we are and who we always have been — a nation of immigrants," he said. "By forcing undocumented immigrants to live and work in the shadows, we all lose."

Undocumented immigrants compose 10 percent of the state's workforce, contributing \$130 billion annually to its gross domestic product.

Tuesday's announcement comes on the heels of the implementation of AB 60, a pioneering legislation that gives undocumented immigrants the legal ability to obtain driver's licenses.

The legislation, penned by Alejo, has drawn an overwhelming — and unprecedented — amount of applicants.

Close to 500,000 people have applied under AB 60 since the law was implemented on Jan. 2 — double the number of applications officials had projected to receive at this point, according to the latest DMV report.

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