

Immigration battle fought within state

Devlin Houser For The Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Thursday, April 8, 2010 12:00 am

Now that Washington is no longer fixated on overhauling health care, local immigration-advocacy groups see the potential for changes they favor. But they're reluctant to shift their efforts from state-level work.

Members of the Border Action Network have been working feverishly to stop a bill that would give Arizona the strictest set of immigration laws in the country.

The bill, sponsored by Republican Sen. Russell Pearce, would compel all Arizona agencies, including local police departments, to enforce federal immigration laws - something they currently aren't required to do.

"People like Russell Pearce and bills like this wouldn't have to come to fruition or wouldn't even happen if the federal government were more able to pass comprehensive immigration reform," said Hilary Tone, the group's communications coordinator.

Tone said the group's roughly 800 members advocate for compassionate immigration laws, including helping family members of legal immigrants get citizenship and legalizing those who are living and working here illegally.

Members score state legislators on their immigration voting records, send them postcards and thousands of e-mails, and hold protest rallies.

But even with the health-care bill now passed and signed, and a march in Washington last month that drew about 200,000 immigration-overhaul supporters, Tone remains skeptical that Congress will tackle immigration anytime soon.

"I can't say if it will pass this year," she said. "It has been very frustrating."

Tone isn't alone in her skepticism and frustration. Melanie Nelson, the leader of the Pima County Interfaith Council, said she was disappointed with, but not surprised by, the lack of progress. President Obama had pledged during his campaign to address immigration policies in his first year of office.

"I took note of it," she said. "But immigration isn't something new. And we see the repercussions of nothing happening federally with what the state Legislature does."

The group is made up of about 40 member institutions - mostly churches - and another dozen affiliate organizations. Nelson and volunteers work to encourage support for immigration policies that they see as more humane, with a focus on family unification.

"We're having what we call 'conversations through academies' inside our institutions," Nelson said - something that they've stepped up as immigration-law change becomes more prominent.

The goal of these conversations is to encourage open dialogue about immigration and get people who are "on the fence" to support pro-immigration measures, she said.

"There's more movement than there has been in a while," Nelson said, citing a recent bill co-written by Sens. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. Nelson said that although she was hopeful, she didn't know if an immigration-overhaul bill would likely pass this year.

Not everyone, however, is advocating for more immigrant-friendly policies.

Glenn Spencer, president and founder of American Border Patrol, a nonprofit group that aerially monitors the border, favors stricter illegal-immigration policies.

He said he generally was in favor of Pearce's bill, provided it includes sufficient limits on interagency information-sharing.

"It's time we have to stretch the envelope" (on immigration enforcement), he said. "It's time we have to take some firm action." Loose immigration policies, he said, would be tantamount to "importing poverty" and would "destroy Arizona."

Despite potential policy change at the state level, changes in federal immigration law seem to be making little headway.

Both the Interfaith Council and the Border Action Network sent people to the March 21 rally in Washington. But for now, neither group is radically changing its advocacy at the federal level, said Matt Matera, a volunteer with the group. The most important fight right now, he said, is in Phoenix.

Other Southwestern states look to Arizona for guidance on immigration laws, which is why it is so important to monitor what happens locally, Matera said.

"Arizona's not living in this silo," he said. "It's almost like that national effort is happening, but in a local sense, because we're so connected."

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