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E-Verify program confirming workers' legal status grows in popularity

By Anna Gorman
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The federal government's E-Verify program, which seeks to reduce the hiring of illegal immigrants, is becoming increasingly popular, with 1,000 new businesses signing up each week despite concerns about its reliability.

More than 124,000 businesses, including nearly 10,000 in California, are signed up for the Web-based identification program that enables employers to check whether an employee is authorized to work, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Among the employers enrolled in the state are restaurants, hospitals and temporary employment agencies.

Last week the Obama administration announced that it wanted Congress to allocate \$12 million more to the program in the next fiscal year, bringing its budget to \$112 million. And Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said in a congressional hearing that the program was "a cornerstone of workplace enforcement across the country."

"E-Verify is an essential tool for employers to maintain a legal workforce," she said in written testimony. "Nevertheless, room for improvement always remains."

Napolitano said the government planned to improve the accuracy of the databases and strengthen the training of employers to protect workers against discrimination.

E-Verify, run by the Department of Homeland Security, uses government databases to check the names, dates of birth and Social Security numbers of new hires to determine whether those individuals are eligible to work in the U.S. The program is voluntary, though a few states have passed laws requiring all businesses to participate and several others mandate its use by public employers.

At the end of June, all federal contractors and subcontractors will be required to begin using it. Last fiscal year, more than 6.6 million names were checked under the program, according to the citizenship agency.

E-Verify is an effective way to attack the jobs magnet for illegal immigrants, said Roy Beck, executive director of Numbers USA, which favors stricter controls on immigration. Beck said he hoped the increase in funding would result in more employers signing up.

"If there aren't jobs, they stop coming," he said. "We would rather solve the immigration problems not with people wearing uniforms and guns but simply with papers, just running someone through the computer."

But Angela Kelley, vice president for immigration policy at think tank the Center for American Progress, said E-Verify was not “ready for prime time.”

“Supporters frame this as an immigration enforcement solution,” she said. “It’s really American workers having to ask the government for permission to work.”

Immigration attorney Peter Schey said that though the program might be politically popular, it was unlikely to solve the issue of illegal immigration and would only push more undocumented workers underground. “They won’t leave the country because of E-Verify,” he said.

Business groups generally support E-Verify but criticize the error rate. The government reports that the program has a 96% accuracy rate. But even a small error rate could disqualify millions of workers if the program were to be expanded to the entire workforce, said Randel Johnson, vice president of labor, immigration and employee benefits for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Despite that, many businesses want to be on the right side of the law and are willing to try out the system if it helps protect them from inadvertently hiring undocumented workers, said Tamar Jacoby, president of ImmigrationWorks USA, a national federation of employers.

But Jacoby said there was an even bigger problem for employers. “We can’t have a workable system of E-Verify if we don’t have a legal immigrant workforce,” she said.

That’s why many agricultural companies haven’t signed on, said Bryan Little, director for labor affairs for the California Farm Bureau. Little said he worried about having enough people to work the fields.

“It’s not in our benefit to hire illegal workers,” he said. “The way the marketplace looks right now, farmers don’t have a better option available to them.”

Several local employers said E-Verify was quick and efficient. Stronghold Engineering, a government contractor in Riverside that does construction projects for the Defense Department, started using E-Verify about a year ago to check the employment status of new hires.

“You always want to make sure you are hiring someone who is authorized to work in the United States,” said human resources manager Angela Rayfield. “This program is very user-friendly.”

Employment service AppleOne Inc., which places workers at a variety of businesses, started using E-Verify at all of its California branches in 2007. Human resources manager Linda Madigan said it shifted the burden of validating documents from the company to the government.

“The E-Verify program is one of the best things we did,” Madigan said. “The [branches] don’t have to look at the documents anymore and decide if it looks right or not.”

At AppleOne’s downtown Los Angeles branch on a recent day, office coordinator Mayela Solorio ran an applicant’s personal information through the system and within seconds received a response from the government: “Employment Authorized.”

“He’s good to go,” she said.