



## **Our Opinion: Fixes may make E-Verify more usable for businesses**

EDITORIAL

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The federal identification program at the heart of Arizona's employer sanctions law has a new life - but with badly needed checks and improvements.

Congress moved last week to extend the E-Verify program for five years, instead of letting it expire in November.

And Congress imposed requirements that should make this now-shaky program more effective and - most important - more accurate.

E-Verify started out as the federal government's Basic Pilot program, which was supposed to give employers a simple way to check the citizenship of people applying for jobs.

That was essential after the Legislature passed and Gov. Janet Napolitano last year signed a law imposing some of the nation's strictest sanctions on companies that hire people who are in the country illegally.

Business licenses of employers that knowingly hire illegal immigrants can be suspended, then permanently revoked for a second offense.

But the federal check system - whether it is known as Basic Pilot or E-Verify - has not been up to that responsibility.

The overarching problem is the use of Social Security numbers.

E-Verify can tell an employer that the person with a given Social Security number is permitted to work. It can't say if other people are using the same Social Security number at the same time. And it can't tell if the person presenting that number is the one assigned to it.

There also have been errors. Even with relatively few businesses using Basic Pilot/E-Verify, the government admitted that 1 in 20 inquiries produces a wrong answer. Businesses that used it said the error rate is actually closer to 1 in 7.

That's unacceptable. People in this country legally have told of being rejected by the system and spending a substantial amount of time unable to work and unable to clear their names.

In agreeing to extend the E-Verify program, Congress inserted needed checks:

- The extension is for five years, not the 10 originally proposed.
- The Government Accountability Office will report to Congress on the causes of errors, how those errors are fixed and the effect those errors have on individuals, employers and federal agencies.
- The GAO also will examine the experiences of small businesses that have been using Basic Pilot in states - such as Arizona - that require its use before anyone is hired.

U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, a southern Arizona Democrat, has been among the critics of Basic Pilot. She said she reluctantly went along with the five-year extension because there was no good alternative.

"Within five years or less, the federal government must develop a mandatory system that works uniformly across all 50 states," Giffords said in a statement.

And that is likely to happen only as part of a comprehensive reform of the nation's broken immigration system.