

# Los Angeles Times

February 14, 2011

## Conservative Inland Empire cities crack down on illegal workers

**Temecula, Murrieta, Lake Elsinore, Menifee and Norco require businesses to check workers' immigration status in the federal government database E-Verify. Critics say that will push more workers underground.**

By Phil Willon, Los Angeles Times

Out-of-work plumber Pablo Haro scoured the postings at a Murrieta jobs center for openings at local utilities, but he didn't expect any plumbing companies to be hiring.

The recession-ravaged Inland Empire is flooded with laid-off plumbers trying to scratch by, he said. That's why Haro is all for the rash of tough new laws cracking down on the hiring of illegal immigrants in this conservative, suburban valley.

"They're working for almost nothing; it's hard to compete with that," said Haro, who was born in Mexicali but became a U.S. citizen a decade ago. "Construction has crashed, so everyone is scrambling to get any job out there."

Stung by foreclosures and joblessness, politicians in Temecula, Murrieta, Lake Elsinore, Menifee and Norco have been railing against illegal immigrants for taking jobs away from desperate citizens. In December, unemployment ranged from 9.7% in Murietta to 14.2% in Lake Elsinore.

Using a strategy first adopted in Arizona, the cities in January began requiring all businesses to check the legal status of new workers through E-Verify, a free online database run by the federal government that allows employers to determine the immigration status of their workers. Employers that refuse risk having their business licenses revoked.

"The simple notion to why we did it is that we believe that American jobs should go to Americans," said Temecula City Councilman Jeff Comerchero. "Is what we did the cure for illegal immigration? Certainly not. It's a small step. Everyone needs to understand that cities don't have much power when it comes to illegal immigration."

In Lancaster, which last year became the first city in California to require all businesses to screen workers through E-Verify, Mayor R. Rex Parris says the program already has had a deterrent effect.

"That's exactly what we wanted," he said. "As soon as I pull the business license of a Wal-Mart or McDonald's, that's really going to change things around here. And that's what I fully intend to do if we find a flagrant violation."

But critics in the business community complain about E-Verify's reliability. A federally

sponsored evaluation in 2009 found that the program often failed to detect cases in which workers used fraudulent Social Security and immigration documents, while another report in December from the Government Accountability Office noted that legal workers were sometimes wrongly identified. Those who are mistakenly red-flagged tend to be foreign-born, creating "the appearance of discrimination," according to the December report, and they can face bureaucratic nightmares to clear their record.

The crackdown in the Inland Empire comes in towns that, while hard hit by the recession, largely escaped the worst of the economic downturn that crushed the rest of Riverside and San Bernardino counties, leading local critics of E-Verify to credit the area's resilient "tea party" activism as one of the driving forces behind the new policies.

"E-Verify is just another way to scapegoat immigrants for all of our economic problems," said Jennaya Dunlap, an immigrant-rights activist from Romoland who has led the fight against the new policies. "It doesn't really address the broken immigration system, and all it's going to do is force more people to be paid under the table."

Temecula and Murrieta remain among the most affluent and the most Republican cities in the Inland Empire, with Latinos making up less than 22% of the population in each community. In Riverside and Ontario, by contrast, Latinos account for roughly half the population. Both of those cities refused to adopt similar E-Verify mandates.

"It's not whether or not a place has new immigrants coming in, or if it's overcrowded with illegal immigrants. Those factors don't matter," said UC Riverside professor Karthick Ramakrishnan, who researches the politics of immigration. "The ordinances are appearing in more Republican and more conservative areas ... where people care greatly about the immigration issue."

### **A conservative priority**

Ted Wegener, a property appraiser and tea party activist, rallied support for E-Verify in the five Inland Empire cities that made E-Verify mandatory for employers as well as similar efforts shot down in Riverside, Ontario and Yucaipa.

"It's so simple. People come over the border for jobs. If they can't get jobs, they aren't going to come over," said Wegener, who leads a local group called Conservative Activists. "E-Verify is not the cure-all, but it'll certainly improve the situation."

Wegener was inspired by the crackdown on illegal immigration in Arizona, which in 2009 became the first state to require all businesses to enroll in E-Verify. Begun as a national pilot program in 1997, E-Verify was initially voluntary for businesses, but many federal contractors are now required to participate. Since then, 14 states have made E-Verify checks mandatory for public employees or contractors. Mississippi and South Carolina now require all employers to use it.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce joined civil liberties groups in challenging the Arizona law in the U.S. Supreme Court, which heard arguments in December and is expected to rule this spring.

If upheld, mandatory E-Verify laws could sprout up in states and local governments throughout the country.

Jose Luis Sanchez, 40, knows almost nothing about E-Verify.

Sanchez often trolls for day jobs on Main Street in Lake Elsinore. He came to the U.S. illegally from Mexico City 15 years ago and has scraped out a living by mowing lawns, washing dishes at a local pizza joint and working as a handyman — almost always paid in cash and off the books.

"I do work that other people don't want to do," he said. "People without papers still have to survive."

Sanchez is essentially undetectable by high-tech cybernets like E-Verify.

But Ortiz, another undocumented immigrant who wanted to be identified only by his last name, is not. The young father of two is exactly the sort of worker the Temecula City Council targeted when it approved E-Verify last July. Ortiz works as cook at a local restaurant and gets paid by check.

"We've been hearing more and more about it," he said of the program. "It's already hard to find work ... everyone's worried."

### **Critics cite flaws**

Raymond Moon, whose family owns Mexican restaurants from Lake Elsinore down to Temecula, complained that the E-Verify law just adds another layer of government bureaucracy. He's already required to file paperwork to the Social Security Administration on every new employee to verify that they can legally work in the U.S.

"Twenty bucks on an L.A. street corner will buy you a bogus ID and Social Security number. How am I supposed to know?" Moon said. "I don't know how the city can enforce this. Are they going to go to every business and say, 'I want to see your personnel records?'"

Temecula Valley's 30 wineries and vineyards may be especially hard hit by the region's E-Verify programs, said Gary Winder, owner of Stage Ranch Farm Management. The vineyards are outside the city limits, but the few farming companies that oversee them and hire the workers to pick the grapes are in the city.

Winder says he depends on a crew of skilled immigrant farmworkers to bring in the harvest and process the grapes. Many are legal, but others he's not sure about. Either way, he says, there's no one else willing to pick the grapes.

"I've been farming in this valley for 40 years, and I've tried to hire locals time after time. They just won't do it," Winder said. Cities are "putting the squeeze on everybody with no solution. They think they can hire local people to bring in the harvest — and that's just a joke."

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