

'Driver's Licenses for All' campaign debuts in key Minnesota House committee

Advocates say the law prohibiting undocumented people from acquiring driver's licenses poses a safety issue.

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Driver's Licenses for All campaign supporters gather after a House Transportation Committee meeting at the Minnesota State Capitol on Tuesday, Jan. 10, 2023.

"Si se puede, si se puede!" Advocates cheered and held signs in two languages inside the State Capitol on Tuesday to commemorate a key first reading of a bill that calls for access to driver's licenses for immigrants in Minnesota without legal status.

The Driver's Licenses for All bill would allow unauthorized immigrants to obtain a driver's license without showing proof of legal residence in the United States. It had its first reading in the Minnesota House Transportation Committee. The bill is co-led by Rep. Aisha Gomez, DFL-Minneapolis, and Rep. Maria Isa Pérez-Vega, DFL-St. Paul. The transportation committee heard testimony from community organizers and those who have experienced the barriers associated with the lack of a license.

Advocates say the law prohibiting unauthorized immigrants from acquiring driver's licenses poses a safety issue for those who live in fear that a routine traffic stop could lead to deportation.

"It's best for all of us that folks have a document," said Ryan Pérez, campaign manager for the Communities Organizing Latinx Power and Action group. "We have law enforcement saying that we have folks fleeing the scene" who would feel more comfortable taking accountability if they had a license, he said.

Opponents are concerned that driver's licenses would be used for voter fraud or to fraudulently sign up for benefits, Sen. John Jasinski, R-Faribault, said in a statement.

Advocates say many types of licenses allow for the holder to drive but not vote, such as those issued to teenage drivers before they reach age 18.

"We all want safe roads and we can do it in a way that doesn't completely overrun our system with fraud and abuse," Jasinski said.

Proof of residency hasn't always been a requirement for getting a driver's license in the state. That mandate started in 2003 under former Gov. Tim Pawlenty, who saw licenses for unauthorized immigrants as a safety concern coming out of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Eighteen states and Washington, D.C., allow unauthorized immigrants to obtain driver's licenses. Studies have shown that [driver's licenses for residents without legal status lead to fewer hit-and-run crashes](#).

Karla Moreno Dominguez testified Tuesday that she was 4 years old when her immigrant mother was pulled over by the police on their way home from church.

"I think it was simply because of her appearance," she told the committee. "We do not feel safe in this country because at any small thing you can get racially profiled, and at times it means deportation."

Advocates believe that this is their year to see the bill passed, with the DFL majority controlling the House, Senate and governor's office and years of issue campaigning that have gone into the movement. In the past decade, iterations of the bill have been read but struggled to gain momentum. Advocates hope that the bill can be passed in the first 45 days of the session.

"Even within the DFL there were folks previously that were elected, especially in northern Minnesota, that were resistant to things like this," Pérez said. "Even when you had majorities, you didn't have majorities that were pro-immigrant." Driver's licenses also affect labor in Minnesota. Many people cannot secure employment without identification, Perez said. In southern and central Minnesota, fewer public transit options leave workers with no way to get to work other than driving.

A University of Minnesota study found that [two-thirds of unauthorized Hispanic immigrants drove to work](#) without a license in the U.S. The study recommended that planners support legislation like the Driver's Licenses for All bill to increase public safety.

Excitement is rising in the Latino community around the campaign, especially among those who have made the journey to the Capitol in previous years.

Dulce de Rosa's brother fought for many years to secure licenses for unauthorized immigrants, before being deported for not having identification. Now, she is continuing the fight on his behalf, she said through an interpreter.

Many community members understand that this year's Legislature is different, and they have a lot of hope that this is the year the bill will pass, Rosa said.

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