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Bush orders contractors to check legal status of employees



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By SUZANNE GAMBOA, Associated Press Writer

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WASHINGTON - President Bush has signed an executive order requiring contractors and others who do business with the federal government to make sure their employees can legally work in the U.S.

Bush signed the order Friday and the White House announced it Monday.

The federal government has had some embarrassing moments when illegal workers have been discovered to be working for contractors they've hired, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said in a news conference. For that reason it's trying to get its own house in order, Chertoff said.

"The federal government should lead by example and not merely by exhortation," he said.

The order says federal departments and agencies must require contractors to use an electronic system to verify that the workers are eligible to work in the U.S.

Homeland Security operates the Web-based E-Verify system, which Chertoff said 1,000 employers a week are signing up to use. The system allows employers to check Social Security numbers provided by employees. The order would affect hundreds of thousands of workers, at the least, and potentially millions, Chertoff said.

Bush's order is aimed at cracking down on hiring of illegal immigrants. But people who overstayed visas or came to the country legally but do not have permission to work, such as some students or those awaiting work permits, also could be snagged with the system.

"It is the policy of the executive branch to enforce fully the immigration laws of the United States, including the detection and removal of illegal aliens and the imposition of legal sanctions against employers that hire illegal aliens," the executive order says.

The order comes as a worker verification bill has essentially stalled in Congress. A Democratic immigration enforcement bill would require employers to check the citizenship and legal status of all their employees.

"I think it's a great decision. I think it's what the American people have been asking for, common-sense, basic things that are not Draconian or dramatic. Employer verification addresses the real problem and that is illegal employment," said Rep. Brian Bilbray, a California Republican who heads the Immigration Reform Caucus, a group of lawmakers who support tougher immigration laws.

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White House News - AP

George W. Bush

Most employees fill out I-9 forms and submit accompanying documents that employers generally look over to determine whether the worker is legitimate. With E-Verify system, employers enter a name and Social Security number into a computer using the Internet.

E-Verify checks various government databases to make sure the number is legitimate and that it goes with the name that was submitted. If there are problems, the person is tagged as a potentially illegal worker and must resolve the discrepancy.

The issue of using E-Verify has run into opposition over the years from business groups who say the system is burdensome and civil libertarians who say it will lead to discrimination and job losses by U.S. citizen workers misidentified as illegal workers.

Concerns about the system's effect on privacy was to be the topic of a House subcommittee hearing on Tuesday. Several members of Congress were to testify at the hearing.

Chertoff said the system gives correct results 99.5 percent of the time and legal workers are able to resolve problems in less than two days.

But Tim Sparapani, senior legislative counsel with the American Civil Liberties Union, said the president's immigration announcement "will vastly increase, not decrease the incidence of identity thefts because they are turning work-eligible American workers' identities into black market commodities.

"This will not decrease immigration, but it will cause enormous turmoil and economic distress for the poor workers who wrongly lose their jobs due to erroneous government data or whose identity is borrowed by an undocumented immigrant who is desperate to work," he said.

Also Monday, Chertoff said Homeland Security is awarding Boeing Co. contracts to build two sections of Arizona "virtual fence" that are a version of a prototype known as Project 28 that failed to perform as expected. Chertoff said Boeing will use fixed towers, radar, remote-controlled cameras, sensors and other technology in two areas of Arizona.

On the Net: Homeland Security Department: <http://www.dhs.gov>

(This version CORRECTS spelling of Sparapani in paragraph 16, DELETES incorrect reference to 4.5 percent of workers.)

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