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Comptroller's Office releases briefing paper "Immigration Issues in Tennessee"

NASHVILLE, TENN. – Unauthorized aliens' impact on the economy and related issues has recently received considerable attention nationally and in Tennessee.

A briefing paper released today by the Comptroller's Office of Research looks at the potential economic impact that unauthorized aliens have on jobs and wages, and their eligibility for public benefits and services.

The state is limited in its power to control immigration. The U.S. Constitution gives the federal government primary jurisdiction over immigration issues and enforcement. Federal law specifically limits state and local efforts to establish more stringent requirements regarding immigrants' employment and immigration law enforcement.

"Some of the information out there is incomplete and inaccurate," said Susan Mattson, senior legislative research analyst. "The purpose of this briefing paper is to provide factual information on the debate over immigration in Tennessee."

According to Pew Hispanic Center estimates, 100,000 to 150,000 unauthorized aliens resided in Tennessee in 2005, only about two percent of the state's population.

Unauthorized aliens are not eligible for most federal, state and local public assistance programs such as TennCare, housing, food stamps and welfare. Federal law requires access to elementary and secondary education, as well as emergency health care.

Many economists nationwide agree the increase in immigrants boosts the national and state economies and that unauthorized aliens are not taking jobs or significantly affecting American workers' wages. Unauthorized aliens contribute to state and local revenue through sales tax, property tax included in rents and other consumption taxes.

The Comptroller's Office of Research conducted interviews with directors of several Tennessee trade associations. Directors indicated immigrants are filling the need for additional low-skill workers in the restaurant, hotel and construction industries.

Trade association representatives indicated that most of their businesses try to follow the laws restricting employment of unauthorized aliens, but find it difficult to detect fraudulent documents. A 2005 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that document and identity fraud make it difficult for employers to comply with federal requirements to hire only authorized workers.

The report acknowledges that state and local governments have some increased costs from the incarceration of unauthorized aliens for criminal behavior.

“Immigration Issues in Tennessee,” is available on the Comptroller’s website at www.comptroller.state.tn.us.

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