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Threat of Arizona's immigration law weighing on residents

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Amanda Lee Myers, The Associated Press

PHOENIX – As Minerva Ruiz, Claudia Suriano and Silvia Arias awaited their next customer, they talked quietly about food, clothes, their children and their husbands.

The three are best friends, all mothers who are viewed as pillars of parental support at the neighborhood elementary school.

All three are illegal immigrants from Mexico.

They were holding a garage sale in their east Phoenix neighborhood recently to raise money to leave Arizona, to escape the state's tough new law that cracks down on people like them.

"I don't want to leave, but we don't know what's going to happen," Arias said.

Ruiz and Suriano and their families plan to move this month. Arias and her family are considering leaving but are waiting to see if the law will go into effect as scheduled July 29 and, if so, how it will be enforced.

The law requires police investigating another incident or crime to ask people about their immigration status if there's a "reasonable suspicion" they're in the country illegally.

It also makes being in Arizona illegally a misdemeanor, and it prohibits seeking day-labor work along the state's streets.

Student numbers fall

There is no official data tracking how many illegal immigrants leaving because of the law, but anecdotal evidence provided by schools, businesses, churches and health care facilities suggests that sizable numbers are departing.

Many schools across Arizona have seen a steady decline in Hispanic students in recent years, much of it blamed on previous anti-illegal immigration laws passed by the state. Parents have pulled 39



ROSS D. FRANKLIN/The Associated Press
In Phoenix, Silvia Arias (right) is waiting to see how the Arizona law plays out before her family decides whether to leave, but Claudia Suriano is moving her family to Albuquerque, N.M. Both women are in the U.S. illegally.

children out of Balsz Elementary in east Phoenix since April 23, the day the law was signed by Republican Gov. Jan Brewer. Balsz Elementary has a 75 percent Hispanic student body.

In the five-school district, parents have pulled out 111 children, each representing about \$5,000 in annual funding for the district, said Superintendent Jeffrey Smith, who cites the new law as the leading factor.

Businesses hit

Area businesses also say they're seeing the effects of people leaving the state.

"A lot of people have just packed up and moved," said Steve Salvato, manager at the World Class Car Wash, just around the corner from Bellevue Street. His business is down 30 percent.

A strip mall across the street used to be bustling on weekends, he said. "Now it's like a ghost town."

A nearby Food City grocery store reports a 20 percent to 30 percent drop in business.

Ruiz, Suriano and Arias are representative of many families facing what they consider a cruel dilemma: Either leave, pulling their children from school and uprooting their lives, or stay and live under the scrutiny of the nation's most stringent immigration laws and the potentially greater threat of being caught, arrested and deported.

They say they also perceive a growing hostility toward Hispanics, in general.

On the quarter-mile stretch of Phoenix's Bellevue Street where both Ruiz and Suriano live, more than half the apartments and single-family homes have "for rent" signs out front. The women say most of them went up after the new law was signed in late April.

"Everyone's afraid," Arias says.

Arias, 49, and her day laborer husband paid a coyote to get them to Arizona 15 years ago from Tepic, Nayarit, on Mexico's central-western coast. Their children, ages 9, 11 and 13, are U.S. citizens.

Ruiz, 38, and her husband, who builds furniture, came to the U.S. from Los Mochis in the northwestern Mexican state of Sinaloa about six years ago on tourist visas, which expired long ago. Two of their kids, ages 9 and 13, are here illegally, while their 1-year-old was born here.

The family is moving to Clovis, N.M., where they have relatives. "It's calmer there," Ruiz says.

Suriano, 28, and her husband crossed the desert six years ago with their toddler. The boy is now 9, and the couple has a 4-year-old who was born here. They're moving to Albuquerque, N.M., where they already have lined up an apartment and a carpentry job for the husband.

"I don't want to go," Suriano says, wiping away tears. "We're leaving everything behind. But I'm scared the police will catch me and send me back to Mexico."

Some people in the neighborhood are not sympathetic.

"Bye-bye, see you later," said 28-year-old Sarah Williams, who lives two blocks south of Ruiz and Suriano with her 5- and 7-year-old children and her aunt. "They're taking opportunities from Americans and legal citizens."

However, Williams said she doesn't support Arizona's new law because she believes it will lead to racial profiling.

Legal challenges

The law still faces several pending legal challenges. The U.S. Justice Department also is reviewing the statute for possible civil rights violations, with an eye toward a possible court challenge.

The law's backers say Congress isn't doing anything meaningful about illegal immigration, and so it's the state's duty to step up. They deplore the social costs and violence they say are associated with illegal immigration.

The law's critics say it will lead to racial profiling and discrimination against Hispanics and damage ties between police and minority communities.

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