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Lawmaker: Taxpayers spend millions for children of undocumented

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Taxpayers spent \$63.5 million providing benefits to the children of undocumented immigrants, according to Rep. Paul Ray, who wants to see a change to the 14th Amendment to deny those children U.S. citizenship and benefits.

“These are very conservative numbers and numbers that are verifiable,” the Clearfield Republican said Monday. “The undocumented people are certainly costing a great deal of the state budget.”

Under the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, children born on U.S. soil are considered U.S. citizens except in rare circumstances and are therefore are eligible various government benefits.

Ray says those children have become a drain on resources, but he recognizes that putting a stop to those benefits would require a change to the 14th Amendment, which was originally enacted in 1868 to grant citizenship to freed slaves.

He plans to sponsor a resolution in the upcoming legislative session calling on Congress to make the change.

If the Constitution is amended, then the government can begin denying food and medical assistance to the children of undocumented immigrants and those children and their families could be deported.

“We have to take away incentives to come to the United States illegally,” Ray said. “It may not seem very compassionate, it may seem very hard-nosed, but at some point we have to draw a line in the sand and say, ‘Illegal is illegal and we’re not going to fund those anymore.’”

The \$63.5 million figure that Ray cited was prepared by the Office of the Legislative Fiscal Analyst and only includes the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, food stamps, child care assistance and Medicaid, which covers emergency births.

Between 80 percent and 90 percent of the money comes directly from federal tax dollars and not state money.

The fiscal analyst identified those households where members did not produce evidence of citizenship and Ray said he is confident the numbers are relatively close to the truth.



Al Hartmann | Salt Lake Tribune Representative Paul Ray speaks at press conference at the state capitol Monday August 30th on the cost of illegal immigrants in Utah. He wants to sponsor a resolution to alter the 14th amendment to deny children services like food stamps and Medicaid who are born in the U.S. but whose parents are here illegally.

The figures do not include things like public education, which a legislative audit in 2007 estimated cost between \$55 million and \$85 million for undocumented students.

Ray said he has not asked analysts to look at what taxes undocumented residents pay. "I'm not sure there's a way to actually do that," he said, but he plans to ask.

Lincoln Nehring, policy director for the Utah Health Policy Project, said that revoking Medicaid payments for the birth of babies to undocumented mothers would save \$15 million, according to Ray's numbers, a sliver of the state's \$2 billion Medicaid budget.

"If he thinks this is why the state budget is in crisis, we need better legislators. Children of undocumented parents are not the problem and the numbers don't suggest they are," Nehring said.

Nehring said Ray's numbers also likely include people who are not in the country illegally but, for one reason or another, didn't provide the state with proof of citizenship.

"You're going to have sicker kids, uneducated kids, hungry kids and I fail to see how our country or our state benefit at all from that outcome."

And Mark Alvarez, an attorney who works on immigration issues, said amending the Constitution is a politically challenging process that requires a two-thirds vote from both chambers of Congress and ratification by three-fourths of the states, hurdles he thinks are unreasonable.

"I just don't see it as a realistic step to take," he said. "It also strikes me as unwise, because I think you would render those children of undocumented immigrants stateless people."

If the children could be deported, as Ray said they could be, it is unclear where they would be deported to or even if the country they might be returned to would accept them.

Last week, Gov. Gary Herbert said he would be inclined to support the revision of the 14th Amendment, especially if it is found to be providing an incentive for people to come into the country illegally.

Rep. Rebecca Chavez-Houck, D-Salt Lake City, said several lawmakers are planning to address the 14th Amendment issue soon, but want to take time so they are a "voice of calm and common sense in this debate."

"There's a group of us that are concerned with the tone and extent with which this issue has taken hold among some of our colleagues and we will be addressing the issue later this week," she said.

A report this month from the Pew Hispanic Center, a nonpartisan organization based in Washington, D.C., estimated that 8 percent of the 4.3 million children born in the United States in 2008 — about 340,000 in all — had at least one parent who was an undocumented immigrant. In all, 4 million children have at least one parent who is in the country illegally.

The children of undocumented immigrants make up 7 percent of the U.S. population under the age of 18. But more than half of the children were born to undocumented parents who had been in the country for three years or more, which Ray concedes shows that parents may not be coming to the United States just to have children.

It is unknown exactly how many undocumented immigrants live in Utah. Some estimates put the number as high as 110,000, but a study in December by an economist at the University of Utah estimated the number was fewer than 56,000.

The estimated total cost of benefits provided

to U.S.-born children of undocumented immigrants in the 2010 budget

year:

TANF: \$2.7 million

Food Stamps: \$38.7 million

Child Care: \$38,658

Medicaid: \$15.9 million

Administration of programs: About \$6.3 million

Total: \$63.5 million

Source: Utah Legislative Fiscal Analyst

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