



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Adriano Espaillat

Senator Espaillat and Advocates Renew Push for Drivers Licenses for Undocumented Immigrants

ADRIANO ESPAILLAT January 8, 2014

Victor Manuel Ramos, Newsweek

New York immigrant advocates Thursday vowed to resurrect a push for allowing driver's licenses to people in the country illegally.

As other states adopt similar measures, members of the Manhattan-based New York Immigration Coalition believe the pendulum is swinging to their side on the issue.

Steven Choi, director of the nonprofit coalition of about 200 groups, said licenses are a key issue in their "immigrant-equality agenda." A 2007 plan to grant driver's licenses to all immigrants under then-Gov. Eliot Spitzer was scrapped amid a political firestorm.

"The backdrop is that immigrants in New York have been steadily gaining political power and momentum" as a result of organizing and political participation, Choi said.

Eleven states, including Connecticut and Vermont, have granted driving rights to all immigrants, "a shift among the states" making sure "everyone is tested, trained and licensed and insured," said Tanya Broder, senior attorney with the National Immigration Law Center in Los Angeles. The change also has been adopted in the District of Columbia and Puerto

Rico.

Ira Mehlman, spokesman for the Washington, D.C.-based Federation for American Immigration Reform, which favors restrictive policies, said the trend toward looser licensing standards is "a bad idea" that goes against ID safeguards adopted after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and that condones illegal immigration.

"It makes it easy for people to remain in this country" illegally, Mehlman said.

A New York bill to issue driver's licenses to immigrants who provide valid identification from their countries has been introduced by state Sen. José Peralta (D-Jackson Heights), gaining praise from advocates.

State Sen. Adriano Espaillat (D-Manhattan), who chairs the Senate Latino Conference, said he will back Peralta's bill, adding, "It's time for our state to reclaim its heritage as a haven for immigrants."

The license issue affects immigrants without permanent residence in substantial ways and puts many at risk of detention and deportation after traffic stops for unlicensed and uninsured driving, advocates said.

"In many parts of Long Island . . . there is no meaningful mass transit that people can access in order to get to work, to take their kids to school, to go to church, to go to doctors appointments or to visit family members," said Patrick Young, of the Central American Refugee Center in Hempstead and Brentwood. "People are limited to where they can walk to, unless they want to drive illegally."

The immigrant advocacy agenda also includes seeking state-funded financial aid for college students here illegally and protecting a host of other civil rights.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo did not weigh in on immigration issues in his State of the State address this week, though he pointed to a proud heritage in saying that "while other states are building fences, we say we're excited by the diversity."